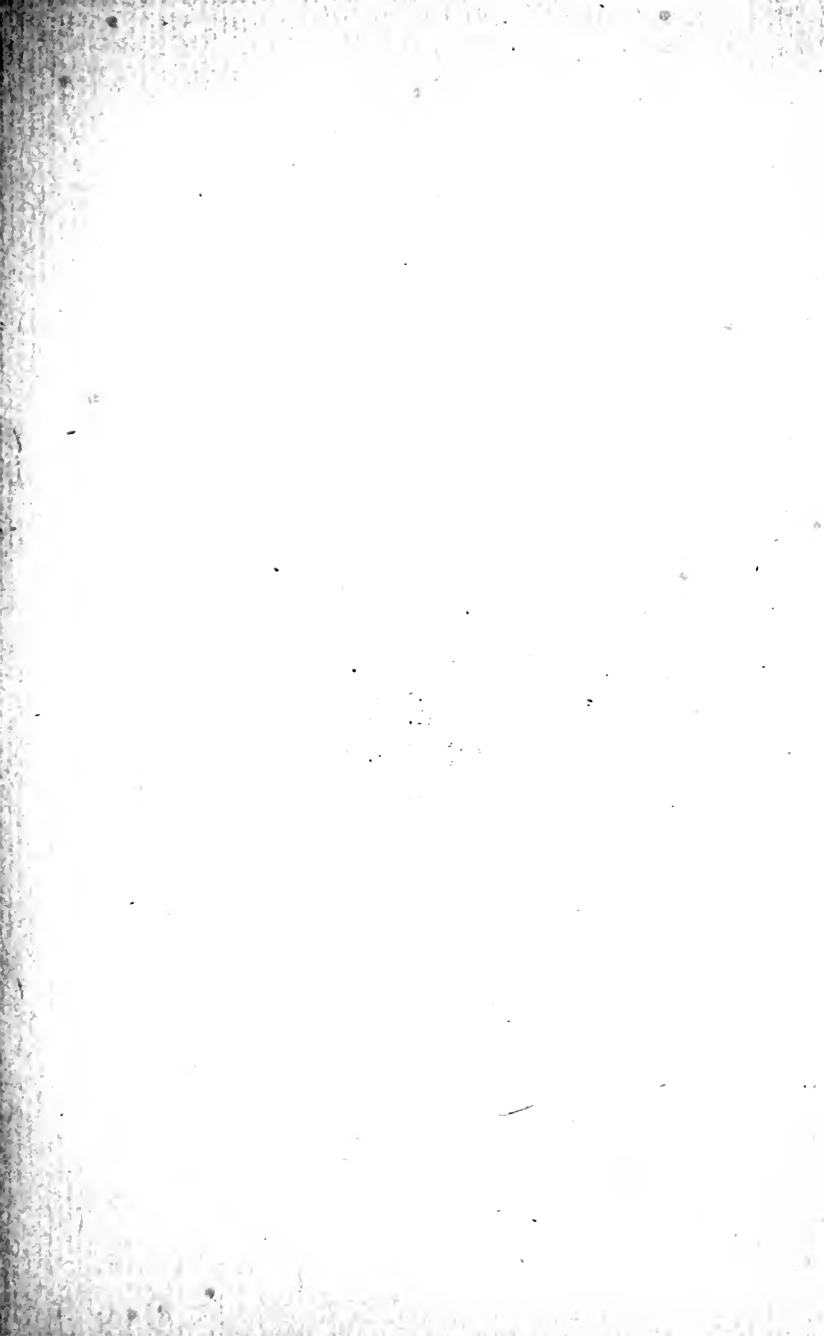




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THE IDEAL ARTIST.

VOL. II.



THE IDEAL ARTIST

A NOVEL

BY

F. BAYFORD HARRISON

..... Love—
A more ideal artist he than all.
TENNYSON.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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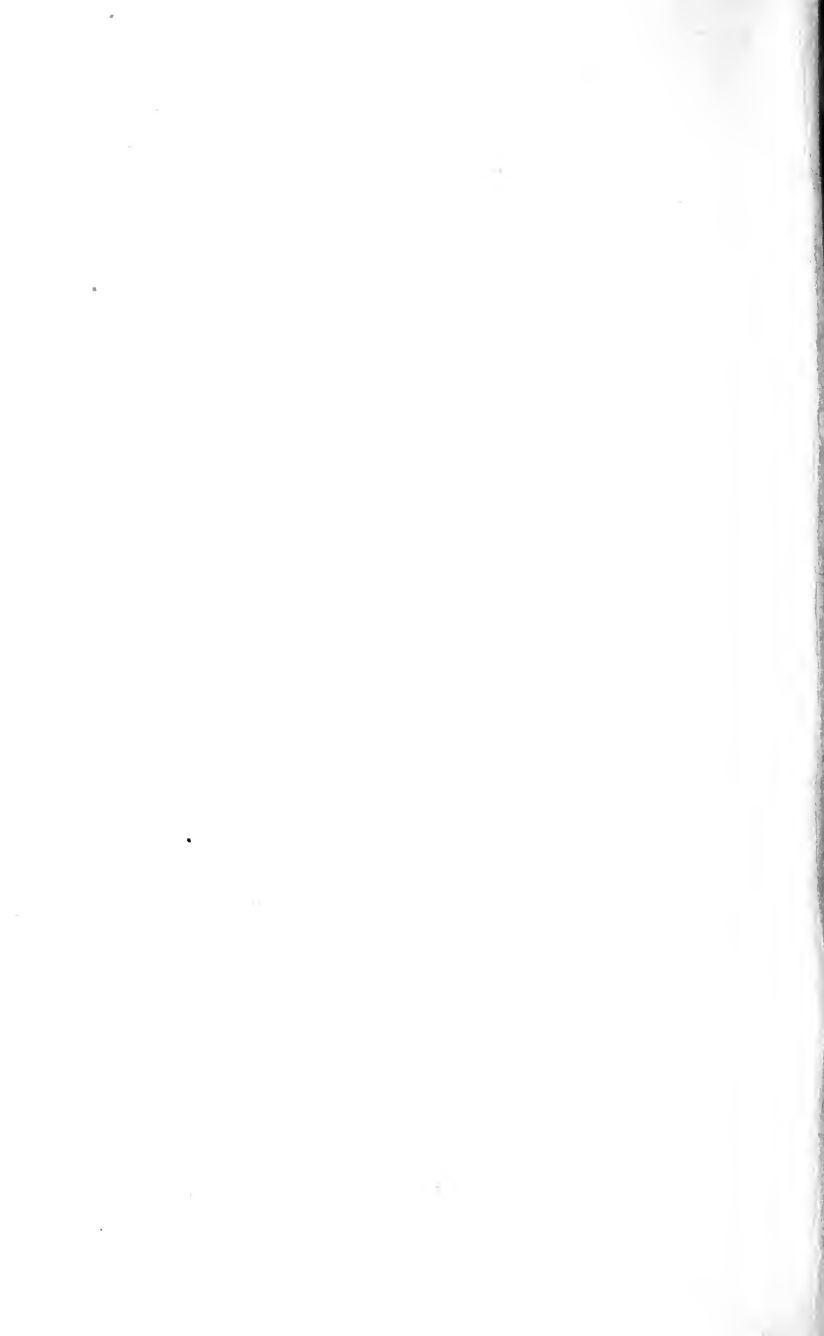
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BOOK II.

(CONTINUED.)

THE IDEAL ARTIST.

CHAPTER XII.

LATER SITTINGS.

Von Perlen baut sich eine Brücke
Hoch über einen grauen See ;
Sie baut sich auf im Augenblicke,
Und schwindelnd steigt sie in die Höh.

SCHILLER.

IF anyone should ask, ‘Why did Mary Smith and John Robinson fall in love with each other?’ no wise person would venture to give an answer. A foolish person would perhaps say, ‘Oh, she was so pretty

and he was so clever, that they could not help themselves.' But John Robinson himself would tell you that Emma Taylor is infinitely prettier than Mary Smith, and yet he fell in love with Mary, and not with Emma; and Mary Smith would allow frankly that Thomas Thompson is a man of far more talents and attainments than John Robinson, and yet it is John whom she likes, not Thomas.

It is clear, then, that love does not follow judgment, nor the heart endorse the opinions of the intellect. Indeed, it sometimes seems that the heart, like a wilful child, takes delight in thwarting the brain. Of course, it says, I know that I am in the wrong, that nothing can come of this fancy of mine, or that even if I could marry the girl I should not be

happy with her. But, for all that, I love her desperately.

Felix Vereker did not suppose that he could ever marry Lady Flora Vere de Vere. But he let himself slide helplessly into the Slough of Love. Every day he sank deeper and deeper. Every day he admired more and more her features, her complexion, her figure, her hands, her expression, her voice. He had known many women very much prettier than Flora, but he had never been seriously in love with any one of them. Her own sister, Lady Clara, was a gloriously handsome woman, but as to loving her——! No.

Flora, almost unknown to herself, was giving her heart to Felix. She was won upon by his evident admiration; and the reticence and self-control which he exer-

cised had the effect of enhancing his attractions. He never by word or act went beyond the courtesy of a gentleman employed on a business transaction. But she knew what he felt. Why these two persons should so mutually be drawn together, it is impossible to say. Flora had not been without admirers and lovers, though the back seat which she took behind her sister had saved her from the annoyance of a very large array of suitors. And now she went up by the pearly bridge, and was carried away in the fresh, free air. And presently Felix found that from his Slough of Love one end of that same pearly bridge led up to the ethereal heights in which he might float about and find Flora near him.

Lord Lillebonne seldom came to the

studio. The discreet Anderson arrived with her young lady in a cab, sat near her with some needlework in her thin, deft fingers, and went away with her young lady in a cab. Even Mrs. Quekett could find no fault or impropriety in the arrangements.

Anderson kept a mental note-book. She took down in cerebral short-hand all the conversations which passed between Mr. Vereker and Lady Flora. It might very likely happen that some day the earl and the countess would attack her (Anderson) and exclaim, 'How could you allow the man to make love to our daughter and never tell us about it?' And then she (Anderson) would reply by giving *verbatim* reports of what had passed at these later sittings.

Here follow some extracts from Mrs. Anderson's mental note-book :

Mr. V. I think everyone should have two pursuits, the one as his work, the other as his amusement ; a hobby as well as a profession.

Lady F. Have you two pursuits ?

Mr. V. Yes, of course. Painting is my profession, and cycling my hobby—my hobby-horse, I suppose I might say. I think that the hobby should be something quite unlike the profession. An author should catch butterflies. A statesman should play golf. A doctor should photograph. A professional cricketer should collect postage-stamps.

Lady F. What should a young lady do ?

Mr. V. A young lady whose nearest duty seems to be that of taking care of herself, of dressing and dancing and flirting, and so on, should take up horrors; she should go to hospitals, and into slums, and learn how the poor and vicious live.

Lady F. I don't think my father and mother would allow me to do so.

Mr. V. (hastily). Oh, I beg your pardon, I was not thinking of any young lady in particular. Certainly it would not do for you, Lady Flora, to go 'slumming,' and that kind of thing, certainly not.

Lady F. There are more women than men in the world.

Mr. V. That is the case in the old, civilized countries. It often strikes me

as curious that in the actual world there are far more women than men, yet in plays, and generally in books, there are far more men than women. In some of Shakespeare's plays there are twenty men and only two or three women.

Lady F. I suppose the reason is that men make the dramas of life.

Mr. V. Yes ; and, as a rule, men write the dramas of the stage. There are more old maids and widows than old bachelors and widowers. There are not enough men to balance the women.

Lady F. And yet every woman refuses a great many men.

Mr. V. Does she ? Perhaps there are men who spend their lives in proposing to women, and are always refused.

Lady F. laughs.

Mr. V. (gloomily). I suppose every man must be refused at least once in his life.

Lady F. is silent.

Mr. V. An old bachelor is a miserable wretch.

Lady F. Oh, yes, much worse than an old maid. And there are no old maids now, because single women all take up professions, or at least hobbies. And the reason why there are so few widowers is that they always marry again, whereas a widow seldom marries again. . She is constant to the memory of her lost husband.

Mr. V. Or she has had enough of one selfish brute, and won't risk bondage to another.

Lady F. and Mr. V. both laugh.

This was the kind of talk which Anderson heard and noted. She thought it most idiotic 'rubbish!' but Flora hoarded up Vereker's *dicta* as brilliant gems of thought, and he was quite sure that a girl who could appreciate everything he said must be possessed of remarkable intelligence.

Occasionally they talked of more serious things. Felix said,

'When I can discover a more divine religion than Christianity, I will adopt it.'

Flora went with her parents to a fashionable church where the incumbent was known as a man who called a spade a spade, and who spoke out on all subjects in the most uncompromising manner. It was he who, when his congregation seemed

listless, interrupted his sermon in order to remark, 'Oh, by the by, bacon has risen twopence a pound,' and so secured their attention for another twenty minutes. Vereker took to going to this church, partly because he enjoyed the bright services and the trenchant sermons, partly because he enjoyed meeting Lady Flora. As the congregation poured out there were many greetings, and many a young man walked away by the side of a young woman. Sir Ronald Stanley was constantly beside Lady Clara, and some other young man close behind. Lady Lillebonne and Flora would be together, and Felix would join them. The countess looked on him as an inferior sort of person whom her younger daughter had met at a picture-gallery, and who must not be cut, because in these

days it is considered good form to be civil to artists and people of that kind.

Arrived at the corner of Eaton Place, Vereker would take off his hat and disappear. Stanley and perhaps some other gilded youth would be invited to enter Lord Lillebonne's house and stay to luncheon, but no such honour was ever bestowed on the artist.

Anderson was much shocked one day to hear her young lady asking Mr. Vereker questions about his family.

Lady F. Do you think you will settle in England, or return to America?

Mr. V. I hope to spend my life in England. You know, my ancestors were English, and I always feel as if this little island was my true home. But it

will depend very much on other people.

Lady F. I suppose your own relations would wish you to go back to them?

Mr. V. I have no relations to speak of. I am an only child. My father had but one sister who died unmarried; dear Aunt Emily! and no brother. My mother had several brothers and sisters, but they were so unlike her that we saw nothing of them. They were rich and proud and vulgar; my mother married my father, a poor man, but a gentleman.

Lady F. Is your mother living?

Mr. V. No. If either of my parents were living, I should have remained at home.

Lady F. Vereker is a good name.

Mr. V. I have heard my father say that he came of a good stock.

Lady F. Do you know anything of your ancestors?

Mr. V. Next to nothing. I was very young when I lost my father, and I have never troubled myself about ancestors. And I don't think I care to trouble myself about them now. A man is what he makes himself.

'There!' thought Vereker, 'I have expressed myself pretty plainly; if she does not like my views, I can't help it.'

Lady F. But don't you think that Blood comes out in the descendants of old families? *Noblesse oblige*. It certainly comes out in horses and dogs and cattle.

Mr. V. Perhaps. But I would rather be the one to start a new good family than the poor wretch at the tail-end of an old

one. However, it is impossible that you should feel quite as I do on this subject.

Lady F. (smiling.) Some of our ancestors were dreadful people. One of them was in a wicked plot in the reign of James I. ; another was notorious for bribing and being bribed in the reign of George II. ; another was always fighting duels, and was killed in one at last.

Mr. V. I have heard my aunt say that some ancestor of ours was killed in a duel. Our great-grandfathers were always fighting duels, so I don't think much of that. And I don't want to know that I had a wicked ancestor in the reign of James I., or even in that of George II. .

He laughs scoffingly.

It made Anderson's blood run cold to

hear people talking so calmly about duels. She suggested at this point that it was getting late, and that perhaps her ladyship would miss her tea if she did not have it soon.

‘Tea!’ said Felix, ‘a good idea. I verily believe that if you were to go down to Mrs. Quekett in the basement, she would supply tea for us all, and contrive to bring it upstairs.’

Anderson’s nose was uplifted at the suggestion, but Flora said gently, ‘Would you mind seeing about it, Anderson?’ and the maid departed ungraciously on the errand.

‘Could I provide tea for Miss Whatser-name?’ Mrs. Quekett repeated, with a sniff; ‘I should not be much use in my position if I could not. But, in my humble

opinion, it would be better for Miss Whatsername to go home and have tea with her ma like a Christian than to be picnicking in a gentleman's studio. What do *you* say?' she added, turning quickly on her husband.

'You are quite right, Rosa; don't give it her, says I. Young gals are so presuming now-a-days that they want taking down, every one of them.'

'My young lady must have the tea,' said Anderson, firmly; 'and, of course, she will pay well for it.'

Mrs. Quekett began to reconsider her objections.

'You always get hold of the wrong end of the stick,' she said to her husband, turning sharply upon him; 'Miss Whatsername ain't a gal like the kind you mean. People

ain't presuming if they are ready to pay. She must have her tea, and you must help carry it up.'

'No, she ain't that kind of gal; and she must have her tea, poor thing,' said Quekett, ready to follow his wife's lead no matter whither it tended.

Rosa was implicitly obeyed by her husband, and seldom disobeyed by anyone else. Great are the advantages of a bad temper.

'And you must excuse me calling your young lady "Miss Whatsername," by reason that I don't know her real name.'

But the discreet Anderson was not to be drawn even by that remark.

The tea in Vereker's room was a great success, and after that became an institution on sitting days.

Oh, this love, and these lovers ! Who can set down the growth of love, or the ways of lovers ? Is it not enough to say simply that John Robinson and Mary Smith loved each other, and leave all details to be filled in by imagination or memory ?

Perfect love connotes perfect trust ; but before love has arrived at the height of perfection it is apt to be slightly diluted by jealousy. Lady Flora did not quite like one or two things which she had seen at the studio. There was one canvas which Vereker resolutely kept with its face to the wall ; he never allowed Flora to catch a glimpse of the painting. We who are in the secret know that it was the enlargement of his ancestress's portrait, and that the reason why he kept it unseen, was

because the earl had politely pooh-poohed the possibility of an American artist having any ancestors worth speaking of. This pooh-poohing, however politely performed, had left an arrow rankling in Vereker's heart, and he was determined that Flora should never see the picture of his great-aunt, or whatever relation she might have been—he did not know and did not care. So Flora continued to survey the back of the canvas with jealous eyes. Perhaps on the other side was a likeness of some girl to whom Mr. Vereker was engaged—perhaps of his wife. Yes; for who knew whether he was married or not?

This was so remote, so intangible, a dread, that Flora de Vere did not dwell very much upon it; but upon another dread she did dwell constantly. The little

picture, which Vereker called ‘Buttercups,’ and which showed a pretty young girl with buttercups in her hair, round her neck, in her hands, might very likely be the portrait of his *fiancée*. When Flora saw Nellie Crane on the first day of her visit to Willow Green, she thought she recognised the original of ‘Buttercups;’ another day she found Nellie in the studio. And though there was nothing of secrecy, or surprise, or shame in the manner of either Nellie Crane or Felix Vereker, yet Flora did not feel perfectly happy when she thought of the girl. When was Love ever perfectly happy? When did it ever contrive to exist without some trouble to feed upon?

CHAPTER XIII.

STRATHTARTAN CASTLE.

Thou art of lasting make, like thoughtless men,
 A strong nativity—but for the pen !
 Eat opium, mingle arsenic in thy drink,
 Still thou may'st live, avoiding pen and ink.
 I see, I see, 'tis counsel given in vain,
 For treason botched in rhyme will be thy bane.
DRYDEN.

ALTHOUGH laid up for a couple of days by a very bad cold, which filled him with aches and pains and kept him at Worcester when he would fain have been on his way to Strathtartan, Augustus Tothill

did not entirely waste the time of enforced seclusion. In the first place, he took occasion to write to an elderly female relation, and to expatiate on the illness which had attacked him while he was travelling in order to collect material for a most important book. His letter to this lady was written with a shaky hand, and bore traces in its composition of feeble health and softened heart. It even contained hints of reviving 'piety,' and of impending 'conversion.' It declared that the writer welcomed sickness and poverty as his due and his discipline. By return of post there came a kind letter and a five-pound note from the old lady. From the time when Tothill was ten years old, this great-aunt had been providing him with tracts and pocket-money.

He also made another lucky hit. He sat wrapped up by the fire in the bar, talking with the landlady and the waiter at intervals, and drinking hot beverages without any intervals to speak of. By degrees he obtained all that was known, and a great deal which was not known, about Lady Clara Vere de Vere's treatment of young Laurence, and about the lad's suicide. It was a sad and sensational story in its plainest form, but, adorned with all the additions of local gossip, it became one of infinite horror and pathos.

Tothill was an adept at exaggeration. With him 'fire' became the 'devouring element,' and 'water' the 'destroying element;' none of his characters ever 'went' anywhere, they 'proceeded.' No-

thing in his category was 'pretty,' it was 'of exquisite beauty;' nothing 'ugly,' it was 'too lamentably hideous for expression;' no noun could exist without an adjective, and no adjective could be anything but superlative. With such a subject before him as that of Lady Clara and young Laurence, he felt his pen inspired. It ran away with him. Between sneezes and gulps of gin-and-water, he dashed off sheet after sheet of 'copy,' some of it in prose, some of it in verse, undoubtedly clever, and undoubtedly scurrilous. It was posted to the editor of the *Monday Moon*, with a request that a cheque might be sent to Augustus Tothill, Esq., The Tartan Inn, by Pitlochry, N.B.

And when he arrived at that inn there was a copy of the *Monday Moon* containing

his article, and also a cheque awaiting him. The fine, free air of Scotland had cured his cold, and he felt strong for the fray. Nor was he insensible to the beauty of Perthshire: its mountains and valleys, its woods and streams, its old castles and its modern villages. He could not stir outside his little homely inn, where the best of food was ever on the table, and the sweetest of spring flowers in the garden, without feeling the influence of nature. Had he not been the slave of his pen, and perpetually driven to write something, good or bad; had he been able to preserve a calm and contented spirit, and one 'at leisure from itself,' to behold and enjoy, he might have been a better and happier man.

But he was a victim to the terrible

complaint, *cacoethes scribendi*. He could hardly exist without a pen in his hand. When he saw a fine landscape, he immediately began to consider how he would describe it—with how many adjectives, and with how many superlatives; when he heard an interesting incident related, he wondered if he could put it into such a form as would suit one of the mags; when he met a pretty woman or a clever man, his immediate thought was that he would sketch the face of the one, or the conversation of the other, and on that foundation work up an ‘article.’ Everything in the whole world appeared to him as subject-matter for literature. No doubt his poverty had much to answer for, but the poorest of literary men, if he knows the dignity of his profession, should not be for ever

on the look-out for 'copy.' The doctor need not regard everyone whom he meets as a possible patient, nor the lawyer every word which he hears as material for an action; rest from professional considerations is the best of all rests. And the man who is great in any profession will often take such rest.

Augustus Tothill was so taken up by the thought of what he should do with his discoveries at Strathtartan, that he had hardly eyes for the beauties by which he was surrounded. And yet, even he could not be entirely blind to them. From his homely inn on the roadside, overshadowed by gaunt firs which shut out all view of the mountains, he set forth in the bright morning for Lord Lillebonne's castle. By his landlord's instructions he turned off

the road through a little gate, and was at once on the earl's property. In the month of May there are no tourists and but few visitors in Scotland. Pitlochry itself was quiet; no hydros were open, no lodgings were let, no coaches were running. And Strathtartan was as lonely as the slopes of the neighbouring hills.

Tothill went from the little gate by a path among the trunks of fir-trees down to the side of a small river. Under the trees bracken was sending up its delicate snake-like heads. Through the trunks fell yellow light, turning the bracken to gold, and the soil to copper. A space of broken rock and pebble stretched beside the river. The water was full and foamy: it rushed and dashed among the rocks, with creamy froth in places, and in other

places with pools of amber and ruby. On the further side of the stream spread a space of pasture-land, green and grey, and dotted with white and black cattle. Beyond this sunny space rose gradual slopes of soft hills, undefined in colour because the heather was not yet purple ; and still further away stood higher hills, green, grey, lilac, purple, brown, in varying gradations, and with varied gleams of yellow, orange, and pink. Above all was a breezy sky of intense blue and luminous white cloud.

The ear was charmed by many sounds. All sorts of birds chirped and chattered together, some of them in a lively monotone, some with outbursts of song. Tothill hardly knew the note of a lark from that of a nightingale (which he would have

called Philomela), but he felt, more than heard, that pleasant noises were all about him. The stream gurgled and murmured, taking rhythmical intervals, now breaking into a cry of joy, now muttering of pain, now exclaiming in rage and fury; but through these outbursts of passion it still went on its way with its unceasing babble of hope and work, of contentment and of thankfulness.

On the air came pleasant scents. There was a smell of growing and of greenness, a moist fresh smell from newly-opened buds. There was the pungent perfume of burning turf which always set one thinking of mountain valleys. There was an occasional suggestion of the scent of hyacinths and violets.

Even Tothill, thinking chiefly of how

he would castigate the owner of this lovely estate, paused to enjoy the delights of the scene. Young ashes stretched out their boughs to the light and warmth : Tothill stretched out his arms in their greasy coat-sleeves and wished that he had put on a pair of paper cuffs. A breeze swept through the pines ; Tothill sighed.

‘ Sentimental nonsense ! ’ said he ; ‘ what is nature to me, or I to nature ? It is the loaves and fishes, the loaves to be grown on the land, and the fishes to be caught in the water, which concern me. I care nothing about this Strathtartan, except in so far as I can make it pay. Oh !—how lovely, how intensely delicious it is ! Come on, Augustus, you fool ! ’

He had a difficult work before him, that of gaining admittance to the house. Present-

ly he saw a low grey stone bridge, and beyond that, appearing to look down the stream, a grey stone castle. It had many towers built out in odd ways. It was picturesque, and more than quaint ; doubtless a castle with a history, with a skeleton.

Crossing the bridge, Tothill came to a gate barring the road to the castle. But there were no tourists about, and the gardeners had left the gate unlocked. Tothill walked on. The road went through a pine wood, winding with the windings of the river until it widened and swept round in a great circle before the castle. Two grey stone lodges, one on either side, kept guard over an oaken gate, which gate Tothill soon perceived he could not open for himself.

He knocked upon the door of one of the

cottages. A middle-aged, clean, solid sort of woman responded. Now began the serious work of the day.

‘Oh,’ said Tothill, ‘I am sorry to trouble you, but would you kindly open the gate for me?’

‘What did ye want here?’ asked the woman.

‘I have to go up to the castle.’

‘And what did ye want there?’

‘Well, it is rather a long story. I have just come from Mont Veraye, where Mrs. Pettit was most polite to me, and I have to write an account of Strathtartan, the same as I have written an account of Lord Lillebonne’s English seat.’

‘Ye can write what ye like,’ said the woman, preparing to close the door against him.

‘ Pardon me, I can’t write without seeing the place. Lady Flora——’

The name acted like magic.

‘ ——Lady Flora would be much vexed if I went away without seeing the house. I meet the earl and his family in society. Charming people, all of them. Lady Clara is the finer girl of the two, but there is something about Lady Flora which is very taking.’

‘ Ay, ay,’ said the old woman, softening, ‘ she’s a bonnie lassie and guid. And maybe you know my lad Jamie?’

‘ Of course I do!’ cried Tothill.

‘ Has he grown, sir, do you think?’

‘ I think so; yes, certainly he has grown.’

Tothill was wondering to himself who Jamie might be.

‘He was always so fond of horses,’ the woman said; and then, diverging into broad Scotch, she made the stranger understand that her son was a groom in the service of Lord Lillebonne, and was now in London with ‘the family.’

Tothill quite subdued her when he offered to take any message to her son in Eaton Place. She accepted the offer, and said she would pack a basket of ‘cookies;’ Tothill did not know what ‘cookies’ might be, but thought they were probably something to eat.

He was now allowed to pass through the avenue and garden which lay in front of the house. This building struck him as one which was chiefly new with a substratum of old. It was in colour a light grey, which stood out well from the dark-

green firs around it. Happily, it was not whitewashed like the castle of a certain noble duke whose property is not many miles distant.

To obtain admittance to the castle was now Augustus Tothill's object. He felt himself favoured by fate when he saw the hall-door open and a lady in shawl and parasol come forth. From what the lodge-keeper had said, he had gathered that the factor was living in Strathtartan Castle during the absence of its owner, and he rightly guessed this lady to be the factor's wife. He, therefore, put on his most high-bred and diplomatic air, and approached her with a bow.

'I beg your pardon,' he began, 'but may I be allowed to introduce myself? Augustus Tothill, from London.'

The lady was youngish and prettyish ; she cast down her eyes, simpered, and replied,

‘ Very happy to meet you ; anyone from London is *so* refreshing.’

‘ And anyone from London finds this sort of thing so refreshing ; your lofty mountains, rushing streams, and waving trees give new life to the weary literary man.’

‘ Ah, yes,’ replied the lady, swinging on her forefinger a pair of garden scissors ; ‘ yes, they are so very nice, *so* rural. But oh, anyone who is used to intellectual pursuits must feel *lost* in the country—no kindred souls with whom to exchange sentiments.’

Tothill saw that he could manage this lady. She held her parasol so as to keep

off the bright sunshine and the keen wind, and she put her head on one side, and stood in a most graceful attitude.

‘You are right,’ returned the author; ‘those who possess minds above the average, who appreciate the best poetry, the best pictures, the best music, the researches of science, the discoveries of knowledge, such exalted souls are like shipwrecked mariners when they are cast away on the barren islands of ignorance, or benighted on the arid deserts of arctic regions.’ Here he felt that he was mixing his metaphors, so he deviated into sense. ‘You have no doubt lived in circles of intellectual pre-eminence among the great minds of our great metropolis.’

‘I was brought up in Edinburgh,’ replied the lady, ‘and there one meets *such*

clever people. I have seen the Historiographer Royal and the Astronomer Royal talking together in Princes Street; and I have heard my father discoursing with a dean and a chemist—not a druggist, you know, the *other* kind of chemist—and it was delightful to know that *such* men were among us!’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Tothill.

‘But,’ pursued the factor’s wife, ‘it is not every man who can understand the cravings of a woman’s nature. *They* think all *we* want is food and clothing, and a flower-garden and a pony-carriage. But what we really need, Mr. Tothill, is congenial companionship—I say it a hundred times a day, *congenial companionship*.’

‘We all need that,’ sighed Tothill, ‘but

few of us get it. May I ask if the interior of this castle——’

‘ You may well ask,’ interrupted the lady, ‘ for it is a question I ask of Mr. Maclaren, and I never obtain a satisfactory reply. True, there are old pictures, and old books, and old china, but not a Rossetti among the pictures, nor a Swinburne among the books ; and as for china, I *cannot*, I *cannot* make china my chief object in life. My husband takes *no* interest in my views ; we live here in an oasis from which the tide is ever ebbing, and I feel myself growing rusty, and I feel that I could take wings and fly to Kentish Town where my cousin has a villa. But won’t you come in and rest a little ? Did you wish to see Mr. Maclaren ?’

‘Thank you, I will rest a little,’ was Tothill’s answer, as he followed Mrs. Maclaren into the wide entrance-hall; ‘no, I did not specially wish to see Mr. Maclaren. I am commissioned to write histories of the Earl of Lillebonne’s country seats. I have already visited Mont Veraye and now I am happy to find myself at Strathtartan. At Mont Veraye, I was hospitably entertained by Mrs. Pettit, the housekeeper; but here I find an entertainer of quite another type. I little thought that a lady so *intellectual*, so deeply versed in *mental lore*, so fired with enthusiasm for *culture* and *art*, could be found wasting her sweetness on the desert air.’

‘It is my misfortune not my fault,’ said Mrs. Maclaren, humbly and sadly; ‘but let us speak of yourself, Mr. Tothill. Will

you kindly tell me the names of some of your books ?’

He named at random half-a-dozen pamphlets and articles, and added that of the three-volume novel which he was for ever planning.

‘ I am a very ignorant person,’ said Mrs. Maclaren, ‘ and I have never read any of them ; but I will write to the library at Perth and order them all to be sent to me. Will you take some refreshment ?’

‘ No, thank you,’ replied Tothill, ‘ I have little time to spare. Might I ask you to allow me to look round the house which I have to describe ?’

‘ Of course, Mr. Tothill. This is the entrance-hall. Rather bare and cold to my mind. I think a linoleum floor-cloth—to imitate blue and white tiles—would be much

more cheerful than this black oak. And if the bannisters were gilt they would lighten up the place.'

She led the way to a great, dim, chapel-like dining-room.

'I want my husband to have electric light put on here; these hanging brass lamps are *so* old-fashioned. And it *so* sad to be out of date.'

Tothill, still on the look-out for structural cupboards, saw on either side of the fire-place a deep recess filled in with shelves, and the shelves laden with old bronze cups and daggers, quaint china mugs, and such curios, but no skeleton. So, too, in the morning-room, and in Lady Lillebonne's boudoir, and in the ball-room, he beheld many strange objects of much interest to the antiquarian, but the

loquacious Mrs. Maclaren could give him no useful information concerning them.

At length they came to the drawing-room, a long apartment with a row of windows looking south-west, and disclosing as beautiful a view as is to be seen in all Scotland ; there was a terrace, below which was a thick wood of mingled gloomy fir and graceful birch and beyond them the green valley, through which the river took its silvery way ; all around were the many-hued hills, on the highest peaks of which the luminous clouds rested in softly-rounded forms. But neither Mrs. Maclaren nor Tothill gave more than a glance at the loveliness outside ; they were now intent on the furniture and fittings of the castle.

‘ This is the only room fit to sit in,’ the

factor's wife exclaimed; 'all the others give me the creeps, and this one, though I admire the upholstery, is really in other ways too much for my nerves. Indeed, if Mr. Maclaren were not Lord Lillebonne's cousin, I should not consent to live here.'

Thought Tothill, 'You might not have the chance, my good madam.'

'Blue and gold is a pretty combination, though certainly yellow is more *æsthetic*. But, then, poor dear Lady Lillebonne is not *æsthetic*; she is much taken up with worldly matters: "the world is too much with her," and she lacks *innate* culture. If she would allow *me* to re-furnish this room I would have——' etc., etc.

While the lady meandered on through what sounded like Hampton's or Maple's catalogue, Augustus was making mental

notes. He *must*, he absolutely *must*, find material for his article on Strathtartan Castle; so far he had got hold of no 'stuff,' nothing but what would do for 'padding.' Jamie's mother and the factor's wife would adorn the tale, but would not serve to point a moral.

At length his eye lighted on something remarkable. In the middle of one side of the room was a square space draped over with Indian shawls. Against the shawls was pushed close the grand piano.

'Here,' cried Tothill to himself, with inexpressible joy, 'is The Mystery!'

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MYSTERY.

A spot of dull stagnation, without light,
Or power of movement.

The Palace of Art. TENNYSON.

MRS. MACLAREN saw that her guest's eyes were fixed on the draped shawls, and she turned towards the windows.

‘ You can see Schehallion very well to-day ; come and look at him.’

But Tothill was not to be moved from his purpose by so childish a pretence.

‘Thank you,’ said he, ‘but something more attractive is here. I think these Indian shawls are the most interesting things I have seen in this house.’

‘They are very fine,’ returned the lady; ‘but I will show you some tapestry, oh, so beautifully executed.’

She made for the door.

‘Allow me to inspect these shawls a little longer. Not only are they curious in themselves, but they are strangely arranged. I never before saw shawls draped against a wall in this fashion. One would almost think that there must be something behind them.’

He looked keenly at Mrs. Maclaren, and saw that she was pale, deathly pale. He stretched his long arm across the top of the piano, but drew it back when he re-

membered that he had forgotten his paper cuffs.

‘Is there not a door behind them?’ he asked.

‘Oh, don’t!’ said Mrs. Maclaren, piteously.

‘Remember, my dear lady, that I am here in order to gather up all possible information about the house.’

‘Yes, but we never, *never* talk about this door. Oh, I shall faint if you go on like this! My nerves are not strong enough to endure such pressure. Forbear, Mr. Tothill, to enquire farther.’

He shook his head.

‘I have no fears for myself or for you. I will protect you. Trust to me. I will draw aside these shawls.’

‘Oh, don’t!’ murmured the lady.

Tothill caught sight of a servant at the door of the room. She disappeared when he walked towards her. He did not wish for spectators of his doings, and he closed the door.

This done he returned to the piano. Mrs. Maclaren sank upon a sofa. She was extremely curious to see what would happen if Tothill touched the draperies, and yet extremely alarmed at the prospect. Fear and curiosity mingled kept her still.

Tothill pulled the piano out into the room. Then he went to the shawls and drew them aside. What was then seen was nothing more than an ordinary door, painted in pale blue and gold like all the wood-work of the room. There was no lock, no handle, no keyhole; nothing by

which the door could be opened, or even shaken. A mysterious door, certainly!

The author and the lady stared at it blankly. It told no tale, it did not even give any hint.

‘Humph!’ muttered Tothill.

‘My gracious me!’ sighed Mrs. Maclaren.

Tothill put his ear to the panels, but heard nothing; put his nose, but smelt nothing.

‘I should like to open it,’ said he.

‘You can’t!’ she screamed.

‘Oh, yes, I could. With a screw-driver and a good heavy hammer I would undertake either to prise it open, or to smash it in. It could easily be repaired.’

‘It must not be opened,’ said Mrs. Maclaren.

‘Why not? What is inside?’

‘No one knows.’

‘Be it ours to find out!’ cried Tothill;

‘perhaps it leads into another room.’

‘No, it is in the outer wall.’

‘Then it may have been once a window, now built up.’

‘There is no mark of any such thing to be seen on the outside. Ah, Mr. Tothill, you know not what you are speaking of. Generations of men and women have gazed upon that door with awe and wonder, and not one has ever dared to open it.’

‘But why not? Has no one sufficient public spirit to dismask the lordly miscreant, to disinter the shameful secret, to unearth the ghastly skeleton?’

‘Oh, don’t, *don’t!* how can you talk of

skeletons when there may be one just within that door?’

‘That is exactly what I want to ascertain.’

‘It cannot be ascertained. Everyone who owns this castle is bound under tremendous penalties—my husband says a hundred thousand pounds, but I believe it is a matter of life and death—never to open that door. Lord Lillebonne cannot open it if he would.’

‘Oh!’ said the author, who saw that, even for the sake of ‘copy,’ he could not act burglar within another man’s house; ‘but report says that the eldest son of the Earl of Lillebonne is taken on his twenty-first birthday into this secret chamber, and after he comes out is never seen to smile again.’

‘ I don’t know,’ said Mrs. Maclaren, still on the sofa in a state of collapse ; ‘ Lord Lillebonne smiles sometimes, and I hear that Lord Senlac is the gayest of the gay ; a man can’t live with comic singers and negro minstrels without smiling ; can he ?’

‘ It was a murder, I suppose,’ said Tothill, foreseeing plentiful materials for his article ; ‘ a horrible murder by husband or wife, or by one brother of another. And the bleached remains of the victim are walled-up here.’

‘ Oh, how can you !’ moaned the lady, who greatly enjoyed the gruesome suggestions which Tothill was, in fact, preparing for his article.

‘ I only wonder that an unhappy spirit, that of victim or of murderer, does not

wander about the castle or the grounds.'

'It does! A *something* in white has been seen in the avenue; strange noises are heard in the corridors. Ah! if my husband were not a cousin of Lord Lillebonne's, and if he were not well paid for it, I would never consent to take charge of this house when the family are away. I would live all the year round in our damp little cottage down by the ferry rather than dwell in the marble halls under the shadow of a nameless and overwhelming crime.'

Tothill thought that 'a nameless and overwhelming crime' might do very well as the title of his article. But he must persuade Mrs. Maclaren to tell him all that she knew.

'The innocent need fear no harm,' he

remarked, 'the judgment cannot fall upon you. Would it not relieve your mind to tell me all you know about this mysterious affair?'

Now, Mrs. Maclaren was one of those half educated people to whom the world is full of half wonders; not those real wonders of beauty and love and goodness which surprise the thoughtful man; but little mock wonders, such as ghosts seen in the moonlight by maid-servants, and uncanny noises heard by superstitious, whisky-sodden gillies. She was amazed at finding herself unexpectedly entertaining an author from London. That he was ill-dressed and not over clean, and with a lean and hungry air about him, she saw plainly enough; but she remembered that Dr. Johnson and Chatterton were very

poor, and that Tennyson was not remarkable for gorgeous raiment. It was quite in character for an author to be shabby; and she told herself that she was entertaining a Johnson-Chatterton-Tennyson unawares. And not only so, but the guest also was entertaining, less by the way he talked than by the way he listened. During the luncheon, to which the factor's wife invited the author, she discoursed on the ghostly visitants who had been seen in the avenue, and on the clanking chains and heavy footsteps which had been heard in the empty turrets. Tothill gladly gave an ear to all these legends; would they not stuff out his article to a most imposing bulk?

After eating and drinking in true Scotch style, Tothill began to think of taking his

leave. But, while still at table, he and his hostess were interrupted by the sudden appearance of Mr. Maclaren, a rather rough and ready sort of man.

At the sight of her husband, Mrs. Maclaren's manner changed; she stiffened, and yet winced beneath his eye. Her introduction of Tothill was deprecatory; and her farewell to him ceremonious. She was evidently anxious now to get rid of him, and probably some sharp rebukes would be administered by the factor, who, to a Scotsman's love of hospitality united a Scotsman's love of economy. With much courtesy and covert distrust, Mr. Maclaren got Tothill out of the place, and then returned to demand of his wife what could induce her to ask an utter stranger to eat and drink in that house.

Tothill was profuse in his thanks to Maclaren for the lady's great kindness to a way-faring man, and then was hurrying to the gates, when out came Jamie's mother from the lodge, bearing a square biscuit tin wrapped in brown paper and tied round with string. This tin contained the 'cookies' for Jamie in Eaton Place. It was a rather awkward addition to Tothill's luggage; but he reflected that he need never deliver it to the young groom; and it might prove useful to a traveller who was sometimes hard put to it to find a meal. He took it under his arm, made many promises to the mother about giving all her messages to her son; and then he left the precincts of Strathtartan Castle, and returned to his inn, where he sat down

and began his article on the Earl of Lillebonne's cupboard and skeleton.

It was not difficult for a craftsman such as Augustus Tothill to work up and elaborate what he had heard and seen. First, there must be a description of the 'Earl of Rosecake's Highland castle of Strathplaid,' of the river, the bracken, the firs and larches and birches, the birds and the cows; then the castle must be pictured with every tower and turret; then the dining-room and all the rooms, winding up with that in which was the mysterious never-to-be-opened closet in the thickness of the outer wall. As it was impossible to declare what was contained in the closet, it was advisable to suggest everything. Tothill wove together all the

stories which Mrs. Maclaren had told him, and evolved a 'nameless and overwhelming crime.' He more than hinted that the present 'Earl of Rosecake' ought to be hanged as a hereditary thief and murderer; that he was haunted by ghosts, a prey to melancholic mania, a probable suicide, and a certain victim to far-reaching Nemesis. It was such miserable miscreants as the 'Earl of Rosecake' who made the House of Lords a by-word and a reproach, who taught every honest man that the Upper Chamber must and should be abolished, for its most honoured members were the descendants of rogues and felons, and were themselves no better than their fathers. (All the articles in the *Monday Moon* were anonymous.)

Augustus Tothill sat in the little dark

parlour of his inn writing page after page of his article. The landlord looked in from time to time, wondering what those closely-written sheets might contain. They did not look like letters. At the fourth of these intrusions Tothill began to think that perhaps the landlord might be able to add to the stock of legends. The man was easily set off talking, and poured forth strings of tales about fetches, and second-sight, and sounds of terror and horror at which Tothill mentally clapped his hands with delight. Why, Strathtartan might be good for another article! Another five guineas, perhaps.

‘Then there must have been a cruel murder committed there?’ said Tothill.

‘Oh, ay,’ replied the landlord; ‘and it is the belief of the country round that the

bones of the victim are in that closet ; or else the victim himself sealed up, and preserved by witchcraft, and yet alive, and ready to spring out and revenge himself on any person who opens the door. Or, as some think, the ghost of the victim is there imprisoned, and would be only too glad to get out and walk about the country.'

The landlord spoke very *Scotchly*, both in words and accent, but Tothill did not attempt to reproduce the Scotticisms.

After a large quantity of this sort of superstitious speculation, the old man at length seemed to have come to the end of his tether.

'Then, as I understand,' said Tothill, 'the earl's ancestors committed some

dreadful crime, and the proofs of it are hidden in that cupboard?’

‘No, no,’ returned the landlord, ‘not the earl, nor any of the de Veres. Why, man, it was the earl’s father who bought Strathbartan from the Maclarens, and it was Maclaren who, in 1784, bought Strathbartan from the MacNabs. The tale of the murder and the cupboard was told me by my grandfather, and he had it from his grandmother, and it was committed—the murder, I mean—in the reign of James II.; not James II. of England, mind ye, but James II. of Scotland.’

‘Oh!’ said Tothill, blankly; ‘then you mean that the murder and the ghost and all the rest of it have nothing to do with the Earl of Lillebonne and his ancestors?’

‘Nothing whatever. The earl is an Englishman and a new-comer, and I am not saying anything against him. But the murderer and the ghost were Scotsmen both of them, and came to the de Veres by purchase, and not by inheritance.’

‘Oh, I see,’ rejoined Tothill.

(But he sent his article to the *Monday Moon*, and was paid for it.)

‘I fear me,’ added the landlord, shaking his head, ‘that the mystery in the earl’s family is worse than skeleton or ghost. But don’t ask me about it, for I know nothing. The de Veres are new people here; they only bought Strathtartan some forty years ago.’

CHAPTER XV.

A GOOD OFFER REFUSED.

Faint Sir Robert with his watery smile,
And educated whisker.

TENNYSON.

LADY LILLEBONNE was not exempt from worries. The possession of a coronet and the command of ten thousand a-year are no safeguards against the ills which flesh is heir to. Indeed, Lady Lillebonne, like everybody else, thought at times that she had more than her fair share of troubles. She was much troubled about her eldest

son, and lived in dread of his marrying a daughter of Heth, some girl taken from a circus, perhaps. Years passed on, and Senlac did not do any such foolish deed, but his parents felt that at any moment he might present them with an undesirable daughter-in-law. Her younger son did not willingly cause his mother anxiety, but his health was delicate, and if she heard of his having a cold in his head, or a chilblain on his little finger, she was alarmed.

The earl was a great worry to his wife; that goes without saying. His letters were always put on the table in his study, and there he read them and replied to them in quiet. One morning in the beginning of June he found amongst his correspondence a copy of the *Monday Moon*.

‘Who can have sent me this abominable thing?’ he muttered, as with disdainful finger and thumb he proceeded to open it.

On the third page, in a very conspicuous place, and in large type leaded for the first twenty lines, he saw an article with the heading, *Rosecake of Vale Rather*; and this article was scored on either side by a blue pencil. Of course it was intended that he should read it; and he did read it, though it seemed to him foolish to read anything in so vulgar a print.

The article fascinated him, and he read every word of it. Very clever it was, and very shameful. It described the *Earl of Rosecake*—Lillebonne to the life. It described *Vale Rather*—Mont Veraye exactly; it told the story of young *Gridiron*, which was that of young Laurence over-

drawn and exaggerated. Lady Clara was called *Lady Racla*, and was held up to public execration. Evidently the man who wrote it had some personal acquaintance with Lord Lillebonne and his daughter, and some grudge against them. But the earl had no idea who the writer might be, and, moreover, no notion that he had offended Tothill. He had utterly forgotten Tothill.

‘This is too bad,’ Lillebonne muttered; ‘it is shameful; it is a breach of privilege. I am sure no editor has a right to publish an article full of abuse of a peer. I’ll protest.’

He, for once, had grown red with indignation; he trembled with rage.

‘As if I had not enough worries with Senlac, but I must be attacked through my

daughter! This old story raked up! Disgraceful! Yes, I will protest. I'll consult my lady about it.'

He glanced at his other papers and letters, and then took the *Moon* open in his hand and went to seek his wife.

Lady Lillebonne was in the drawing-room, watching the renewal of the flowers in the balcony. She had an agreement with a florist who every fortnight took away the fading plants and filled their places with more blooming ones. As she watched and directed the man with 'one more daisy there, now a geranium, not scarlet, cardinal, a thick pot of mignonette,' and so on, she also lent an ear to a new little song which Lady Clara was practising at the piano, and made her suggestions as to the method of singing it.

‘One more daisy there in strict time; now a geranium not scarlet, but with more expression; cardinal, and very necessary is a diminuendo; a thick pot of mignonette rises through a crescendo up to fortissimo; These lobelias like a storm of passion sinking down into affettuoso.’

The gardener made out his instructions, and Clara followed, as closely as it pleased her to do, her mother’s advice. Lady Lillebonne set up as a connoisseur of music just as her husband posed as a patron of art.

While the gardener was yet arranging and watering, and Clara was still playing and singing, Lord Lillebonne walked into the room carrying the *Monday Moon* in his hand. He seldom saw the ladies between breakfast and luncheon, and his wife and

daughter were surprised to see him now. Both turned and looked at him.

‘I want to speak to you, Clara,’ he said to Lady Lillebonne; ‘Clara, you had better go away.’

‘Senlac in trouble again,’ thought Lady Clara, as she left the room.

‘See here; do you know this horrible paper?’

Lady Lillebonne had never before seen the *Moon*. The gardener, who was a Radical, knew it well, and was now smiling down upon his flowers.

‘It is shameful, disgraceful; attacking one in this way; no one is safe from a stab in the dark. It attacks me through Clara; it is a breach of privilege. I shall protest.’

The countess glanced through Tothill’s article.

‘Yes, these things are very annoying, but I don’t think your protesting will have any effect. I am sorry that Clara’s name is brought forward again. If that absurd young man had not cut his throat nothing would have been known of her conduct to him. But I really hope that Clara will shortly be settled. Sir Ranald was very attentive last night. After supper he always appears more expansive than earlier in the evening. I quite think that if we stay to the very last at all the dances he will arrange matters some night. It will be a great comfort when Clara is settled.’

‘And would you advise me to protest?’ the earl asked, nervously.

‘Oh, certainly ; protest by all means, if it relieves your mind.’

‘If you please, my lady,’ said the gardener, coming in from the warm, sunlit balcony, ‘I think that is all that is needed to-day.’

‘It will do very well,’ replied Lady Lillebonne, ‘but the next time be sure you bring some ivy-leaf geranium; and yellow carnations if you can possibly get them. Calceolarias are too common.’

‘Yes, my lady,’ answered the Radical, and went away.

‘Life is full of troubles,’ said the earl, with a sigh; ‘what with Clara, and what with Senlac, I am often worried almost beyond endurance. And then Eustace does not grow stronger. Flora is the only one of my children who does not give me trouble.’

‘What, Flora!’ cried Lady Lillebonne;

‘she is the worst of all. But you don’t know what she told me this morning.’

‘Oh, dear!’ groaned the earl, sinking into an easy-chair. His wife seated herself on a pile of cushions and poured out her woes.

‘That tiresome girl told me this morning, in the most *nonchalant* manner, that the other day at Lord’s Mr. Merivale proposed to her.’

His lordship uttered an exclamation of pious thankfulness.

‘You need not say that,’ exclaimed Lady Lillebonne; ‘she refused him.’

‘Refused him! In the name of all that is marvellous, why?’

‘Ah, you may well say “why?” Why indeed? I can get nothing out of her but ridiculous answers that she does not care

for him; as if girls were ever in love with the men they marry. It is all very well to have had a love-affair; it is like the measles, you are safe from it afterwards. But as to falling in love with a man and marrying him, ah! there would be few marriages if that kind of thing were necessary.'

Lady Lillebonne was slightly incoherent, but her lord knew what she meant.

'Very true,' he sighed; 'but one may have measles twice.'

'And I should be glad if you would speak seriously to the headstrong girl and try if you can bring her to reason.'

'Certainly, my dear; I suppose it is my duty, though an unpleasant one.'

He was shaking all over.

Lady Lillebonne rang the bell and desired a footman to send word to Lady Flora that she was required in the drawing-room. Presently the girl came tripping in, looking so pretty in her morning-dress that she came upon her parents like a flash of soft light. It would not be wonderful if somebody even better than Mr. Merivale should wish to make her his wife. The earl was very nervous at having to approach a very delicate subject; but he braced himself for the effort.

‘My dear Flora,’ he began, ‘your mother tells me that you have had a proposal of marriage from Mr. Merivale.’

All the brightness died out of her face.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘And that you have refused him.’

‘Yes,’ she said again.

‘Now, my dear child, this is foolish, very foolish. You know really you must not go on refusing all the men in England, for if you do at last there will be nobody left.’

Flora smiled.

‘Not half of them have yet proposed to me, dear father.’

‘But why, why refuse Merivale?’

‘Because I do not like him well enough.’

‘Do you dislike him, Flora?’

‘Oh no, I am quite indifferent to him.’

‘Then that objection counts for nothing. Are you aware that he is one of the richest commoners in England, and that he is heir-presumptive to a baronetcy? Not much

to call a title, certainly, but very respectable. Do you know all that?’

Yes, Flora knew it quite well.

‘Then, my darling, why refuse him?’

‘Because, daddy dear, I could not marry a man whom I did not love.’

She was ‘celestial rosy red’ by this time.

‘Sentimental nonsense!’ said Lady Lillebonne.

‘But consider, Flora; this man has three properties in England and another in Ireland, though, of course, that is not worth much. Then he owns half the East-Western railway, and has shares in every company which is worth anything. He succeeds to a baronetcy and more property and more money on the death of his great-uncle. What more can any girl want?’

‘ I do not want half so much,’ said Flora,
‘ in the way of worldly goods.’

‘ Oh, Mr. Merivale is not handsome,’ said the mother; ‘ Flora would like to marry a beauty-man and be miserable ever after.’

‘ No, indeed, mother; I care very little about a man’s looks. But Mr. Merivale is so dull and so stupid.’

‘ Dulness is an excellent quality in a husband. The happiest women are those who are bright and clever and managing, and who have husbands rather the reverse. A clever woman can quietly take the reins in her own hand and drive the whole team. The man is only too glad to get rid of the trouble of his affairs; he will draw the cheques, and she has the spending of the money. Mr. Merivale is very

good-natured, and you would be quite happy with him.'

'He is so very old-maidish,' said Flora, almost laughing; 'he parts his hair so carefully, and his collar is so stiff, and his boots so highly polished.'

'Would you wish a man to be untidy?' said Lady Lillebonne, with great severity; 'you are of age, Flora, and I cannot lay my commands upon you, and I do not suppose that my wishes have any weight with you; therefore I will only hint at my advice, which is that of an old woman, who cannot be with her unfilial daughter many years longer. I venture to prophesy that if you persist in refusing Mr. Merivale you will live to repent it. You may never again have the chance of a kind, easy-going man of large property and

wealth, and you will regret your folly when you find yourself an old maid on a wretched five hundred a year, which is all your father can leave you.'

With these impressive words Lady Lillebonne paced heavily across the room and passed through the *portières*, and so out of sight, with a majestic air. The earl immediately softened, and sat down beside Flora, putting his arm round her and patting her pink cheek.

'And so my dear little girl would rather not marry poor Merivale? Well, I would not wish my child to marry a man whom she really cannot like; but I should be very glad if you could like Merivale. I don't see why you should not like him well enough. It would be different if there was anybody else whom you pre-

ferred ; in that case, I would not think of urging you. But there is no one else, is there, my pet ?’

‘ Oh, no,’ whispered Flora in her father’s ear ; and she did not know that she was speaking falsely, for she had never thought of Felix Vereker as a possible husband ; she preferred him to every other man as a friend, but beyond that—— ‘ Oh, no ; there is no one else. But I cannot, I cannot marry that wishy-washy Mr. Merivale.’

‘ Then you shan’t, my child, you shan’t. Your mother will be much vexed with you, but she will come round in time ; and we shall put her in good humour when we give her that portrait. How is it getting on ?’

‘I think it is nearly finished,’ said Flora.

‘I have many troubles,’ said the earl, mournfully; ‘even my position brings me troubles. I have a duty to perform in going to the House and asking leave to bring in bills; and also I must enter my protest.’

‘Another protest, daddy?’ laughed Flora.

Then Lillebonne went off to his study to settle with himself in what terms he should enter his protest, and Flora was left alone in the drawing-room.

It was a large, square room full of handsome furniture and china, and was now glowing in the full noonday light. The red-striped canvas which shaded the

balcony sent warm radiance over the flowers and into the room ; within and without there was colour and heat. The street was alive with tradesmen's carts, and with saddle-horses awaiting their fair riders. Merry girls came out from hall-doors and mounted and rode off ; fathers and brothers accompanied them. The London season was at its height, and no capital is gayer than London in its season.

But the pleasant stir outside hardly touched Flora de Vere. She sat where her father had left her, pensive, abstracted. First she thought of the precise, exact, wishy-washy Mr. Merivale, whose very tone of voice was a weariness to her. How could she endure life with a man so utterly uninteresting ? It would be mar-

tyrdom. And then she thought of Felix Vereker, full of originality and talent, who set her every pulse beating, and who was the most delightful of companions. She did not think that she loved Vereker, she knew that she could not marry him ; but she also knew that she could not endure Merivale, and that she would not marry him.

Hot was the air and scented, and bright the noontide beams ; the very heart felt languid, and prone to impossible dreams. Long would the girl have sat there musing, half-asleep and half-awake, had not a sudden noise aroused her, and brought her back to common things. It was the sound of hoofs and wheels coming rapidly down Eaton Place, and pulling up with a clatter at Lord Lillebonne's door. At the

first sound of the rush Flora thought that horses were running away, and she went out on the balcony in time to see Mr. Merivale's phaeton pulled up at the door, and Mr. Merivale's face upturned towards her.

He smiled and lifted his hat. Flora made a formal bow, and retired within the room. What had he come for? Surely he was not calling after her refusal of his suit? Of course not; people do not call in the forenoon. She peered round a curtain and saw him hand a note to his servant, who gave it in at the door. Then Merivale turned his horses' heads, and drove away.

Flora watched him going away. Her eye fell upon another figure: that of Felix Vereker, in a suit of light, grey tweed,

with a grey felt hat on his head, and an air of freedom and unconventionality which came, after Merivale's extreme correctness, like a breath of country air into a London ball-room. She almost confessed to herself that there was some one whom she 'preferred.' What was Felix doing in Eaton Place? Had he come there merely to look at the house which contained Lady Flora? Who knows? He did not see Flora, for she was hidden by the curtain; but Flora saw him.

CHAPTER XVI.

PROTESTS.

Quoth he, 'That honour's very squeamish
 That takes a basting for a blemish :
 For what's more honourable than scars,
 Or skin to tatters rent in wars?'

Hudibras. S. BUTLER.

THERE are clerks *and* clerks. To say nothing of clerks who are clerics, there are as many varieties of the genus clerk as there are of the genus rose. There is the poor little clerk who toils with his pen in the dusky office of some small attorney

or struggling barrister ; there is the hard-worked clerk of some hardly-solvent merchant ; there is the whipper-snapper clerk in a country-village branch bank ; there is the Post-office clerk ; the War-office clerk ; the clerk who is also a partner in a great London bank ; the Foreign-Office clerk ; the clerk in the House of Commons ; and the clerk in the House of Lords.

For *labor cum dignitate*, commend me to the clerk in the House of Lords. He is not of the peers, but he has been near them. Very often he is a peer's younger son ; occasionally he is a peer's eldest son. It has been known that a man has stepped from his desk in the Parliament office to his seat in the Upper Chamber. They are a superior order of beings, these clerks. They walk about that august edi-

fice at Westminster quite unawed by its hereditary sanctity. The Lord Chancellor is no hero to them; the peers are but fellow-mortals. They know the Duke of A.'s little weaknesses; they soothe the Marquis of B.'s temper when he fumes about the corridors; they correct the idiotic mistakes made by the Earl of C.; they direct the Viscount D. how to record his vote; they explain to the Baron E. how he must act when he takes the oath.

These clerks can wander about the House at their own sweet will; they dine and lunch, they even take afternoon-tea within its venerable precincts. Each sits in his own room at his own work; and not only does he know and understand his own work, but he very often knows and understands the peers' work better

than they do themselves. No man can comprehend the procedure of either of the legislative chambers by intuition ; no man inherits a knowledge of his duties as a peer along with his peerage. Therefore it is that Lord Lillebonne, and such as he, are obliged sometimes to apply to the omniscient clerks for information as to a peer's duties and privileges.

Soon after succeeding to the title, Lord Lillebonne had discovered that peers have the privilege of ' protesting ; ' and this privilege appeared to him a very precious one. When fretting and fuming over the many annoyances which beset him he could always let off steam by entering his protest in a certain large book. Not that anything ever came of his protests ; but they relieved his feelings.

The clerk who had to do with the protests, and indeed all the clerks, had good reason to dread the sight of Lord Lillebonne; for that nobleman, estimable as he was in private life, was a bore to everyone in the House. He occasionally rose to speak, and having risen never knew when to sit down. He droned on and on, hesitating and fumbling about for words; and seldom did he understand thoroughly the subject on which he spoke. The Chancellor snubbed him, and the ministers snubbed him; and especially was he snubbed by everybody in the matter of protests; for he was perpetually protesting.

He put down on the paper that he proposed to bring in a bill which should render it a misdemeanour for newspapers

to publish anonymous articles reflecting on the characters of members of peers' families. Lord Lillebonne thought that he could draft his bill himself; it need only be short, sharp, and decisive. The penalties must be heavy. He gave notice of his bill the day after he read how Lady Clara's conduct to young Laurence was commented on in the *Monday Moon*. He carried the copy of that atrocious print in his pocket, and when one of his brother-peers asked him what had made him take up the subject he replied 'personal reasons.'

'But no one has been attacking you,' said Viscount D.

'Not me, but one of my family.'

'Oh, I say hang my family! Everyone of them. My family must take care of

themselves. I can't be looking after uncles and brothers and nephews. And I advise you, Lillebonne, to let your people protect themselves.'

'But a daughter, D., a daughter, think of that.'

Lord D. looked graver. He had not been aware that either Lady Clara or Lady Flora had been attacked by the press.

Then Lillebonne took out the *Moon*, and showed Lord D. the article in question. And as they were in a lobby where many peers were passing, Lord D. called to the Duke of A., the Marquis of B., the Earl of C., and Baron E., and they all read the scurrilous paragraphs, and they agreed with Lord Lillebonne that such things should be put down. And they went

away in a group and laughed together, and said that for Lillebonne to suppose that he could gag a penny Radical paper was too amusing, too amusing for anything.

‘ I shall move that his bill be read this day six months,’ said Lord D.

‘ And then he’ll protest!’ cried Lord E., and there was great merriment; and when the Clerk of the Protests saw the bill named in the Par: Pro: (that is to say, *Parliamentary Proceedings*) he smiled, and said to himself that Lord Lillebonne would soon have occasion to enter another protest.

And all this happened as the sapient clerk anticipated. Lillebonne obtained leave to bring in his bill; and he brought it in. And it was read a first time; and

it was set down for second reading. Then Lord D. rose and made a speech, so considerate and affectionate towards the promoter of the bill that the said promoter was deeply touched. And then Lord D. wound up by moving that the bill be read that day six months. And so it came about that the bill was shelved, and Lord Lillebonne made very iudignant.

Of course, he felt it incumbent on him to protest. He sought out the clerk who usually helped him to protest, for he was seldom able to do it without assistance. He made his way through those long passages and corridors, where at every corner and door a policeman stands to direct those who have legitimate business in the House, and to throw back those who

cannot give a good reason for their presence.

‘Is Mr. Ashdown in his room?’ asked Lillebonne of a constable.

‘I don’t know, my lord; I have not seen him to-day.’

On went the earl till he came to another oak door and another policeman, of whom he asked his previous question.

‘I saw him not ten minutes ago, my lord,’ was the reply.

Finally Lord Lillebonne knocked upon the door of Mr. Ashdown’s room, and heard a shout of ‘come in!’ so he entered.

It happened that Mr. Ashdown was very busy that afternoon. A pile of papers from the printers’ lay on his table; also several open books, and various ‘minutes’

and bills. The House of Lords, which has little to do in February and March, is overwhelmed with work towards the close of the session. Mr. Ashdown, an amiable and polished gentleman, was not at all pleased to see Lord Lillebonne's spare form and white face.

'Oh, Mr. Ashdown, could you give me a few moments?'

'Certainly, my lord,' replied Ashdown.

'I want to protest against the way in which my bill has been rejected, without really any discussion.'

'You can hardly protest on that score,' said Ashdown; 'has there not been a division?'

'Yes; but if I had had time to explain further—and then the very fact of the way in which these weekly papers say the

falsest things and distort true things—I suppose I can do nothing but protest?’

‘It is hardly a matter for entering a protest.’ Ashdown pitied the earl who was helpless in his irritation; ‘but of course, if you wish——,’ for to allow him to enter his protest, was the quickest way of getting rid of him.

‘Where is the book?’ asked Lillebonne, more cheerfully.

Ashdown brought the book from a side-table. He silently put a pen and blotting-book before his visitor.

‘How shall I word it?’ said the earl.

‘The wording matters little; as plainly and shortly as you can.’

Lillebonne dipped the pen in the ink and poised it above the book, which contained a great many of his own protests,

and a few of those made by other peers. But he could not get on.

‘Should I begin with protesting against the way in which my bill has been stifled, or against the breach of privilege committed by the *Monday Moon*?’

‘I don’t think it matters at all,’ said the courteous Mr. Ashdown, who knew that these protests would not be worth the paper on which they were written.

Lord Lillebonne glanced through the window down into New Palace Yard, where, very probably, his wife was waiting in the carriage to take him for a drive in the park. He fidgetted with the pen.

‘The wording is so difficult,’ he stammered; ‘*would* you mind writing it for me?’

‘I can hardly do that; it must be signed by yourself.’

‘ Well, when I have written it will you look it over and tell me whether I have put it in the right form ?’

‘ Yes, my lord, I can do that,’ said Mr. Ashdown, gazing anxiously at the pile of papers awaiting his attention.

So Lillebonne inscribed his protest with many erasures and corrections, and with much knitting of the brows and grinding of the teeth. He felt that he was doing his duty by his country and by himself. Ashdown looked on with an amused impatience, knowing that the folly of the earl was impeding the business of the nation. At length, Lord Lillebonne laid down the pen and went away. He put on his hat, walked briskly through the passages, and congratulated himself on having done his duty ; he had not passed his bill, but he

had protested. He could go out into the hot sunshine with a clear conscience, and drive round the park with a peaceful heart.

As he came out from Old Palace Yard he looked about for his wife's carriage, but did not see it. What he did see was a dirty newspaper-boy holding a poster on which was printed in large red letters : *Monday Moon : the Earl of Rosecake and Strathplaid Castle.*

Horror seized him. He had this moment been protesting against 'Rosecake of Vale Rather,' and behold ! 'Rosecake of Strathplaid' stared him in the face. His first impulse was to snatch the handful of libels from the boy and to knock the boy himself into the gutter. But even libelled peers must not commit thefts and assaults.

He restrained himself ; mildly gave the boy a penny, and with the obnoxious print crushed in his hand, looked about again for Lady Lillebonne and her carriage.

She drove across from Victoria Street, where she had been visiting the Stores ; the servants saw their master and pulled up for him.

‘ Neither of the girls would come out,’ said the lady, ‘ so I ordered the victoria. You look tired ; a drive will do you good.’

As they went by way of Pall Mall towards Hyde Park, Lord Lillebonne unfolded the *Moon* and turned to the article which was in conspicuous type.

‘ I’d rather not go to Hyde Park, Clara ; would you mind going to the Regent’s Park ?’

‘ Nòt at all,’ said Lady Lillebonne, who

was wondering at her husband's manner and at the strange literature which he carried.

Regent Street was nearly deserted at six p.m.; Portland Place was quiet; the Regent's Park was beautiful and calm, with few carriages and chiefly voices of children sounding from among the trees. Lord Lillebonne was able to read his paper without difficulty as the coachman let the horse fall into a slow and monotonous trot.

Lady Lillebonne watched her husband's face and its varying expression as he read. She did not interrupt him, but when he laid it on his knees and gazed vacantly on the trees and flowers and children, she spoke.

‘Something troubles you, Eustace; may I know what it is?’

She only called him Eustace on special occasions.

‘It is this—paper,’ he said, between his teeth.

His wife took it from his unresisting hand, and read the article on ‘Strathplaid.’

‘It is Strathtartan,’ she said, ‘most accurately described. The servants should not allow strangers to go over the house. I will write to Mrs. Maclaren. And yet, I almost fancy that the charming lady to whom the man alludes must be Mrs. Maclaren herself. She is a most foolish, sentimental woman. Maclaren ought to keep her in better order. Do you think this article is of any consequence?’

‘Yes, I do. It is most offensive. Just think how it will delight those red-hot

Radicals in Perthshire; how they will gloat over anything that shows me up. And fancy your friends getting hold of it.'

'Oh, but they won't,' cried Lady Lillebonne, 'no decent person ever heard of the *Monday Moon*. I never did.'

'I don't know. Everybody sees everything in these days. People know the names of things even if they do not know the things themselves. All London will see the posters; and *Rosecake* is plainly *Lillebonne*, and *Stvathplaid* is plainly *Strath-tartan*.'

'Well, our friends will not care about it.'

'There's Stanley, Ronald Stanley, what about him? He's half a Yankee, or an

Australian, or a cosmopolitan, and of course he is a Liberal on the way to be a Radical. What about him?’

‘Nothing,’ returned the countess; ‘less than nothing. If you had been at the Duchess of A.’s last night you would have seen his conduct. We stayed as late as we possibly could in case he might say something decisive after supper. But instead of dancing with Clara, who had declined several partners on the score of being very tired, he sat out with that little girl, that clergyman’s daughter from Devonshire, whom the duchess invited to stay with her as a matter of charity, pure charity.’

Lord Lillebonne was sorry to hear of Sir Ronald Stanley’s defection, but his

mind was pre-occupied with his own grievances.

‘I’ve just been protesting,’ he groaned ;
‘must I protest again ? Oh, Clara, this is very unfortunate.’

‘We’ll get out and walk,’ said Lady Lillebonne, who feared that the servants might hear too much ; ‘stop at the next gate, Lane, we wish to walk.’

As soon as they were on foot, the servants and horse taking their ease under the shady trees, Lady Lillebonne said to her husband,

‘Now, my dear Eustace, do not worry yourself about this. Vulgar abuse cannot hurt us. Even if Sir Ronald takes himself off, there are plenty of other men as good as he. Clara is looking as well as ever this season. And I am sure Mr.

Merivale has not given up all thoughts of Flora, or he would not be preparing this *fête* for us.'

'Vulgar abuse does hurt us very much indeed. This article is written by the same hand which wrote *Vale Rathër*. The man is employed to hunt out our family history.'

'But he has found nothing!' cried the countess; 'he finishes by saying that the skeleton in the cupboard at Starthtartan is not the de Vere skeleton.'

'And he adds that there is a de Vere skeleton, and that he is going to unearth it.'

Lady Lillebonne grew more serious.

'I suppose,' she said, 'there really is some secret in your family. You have often hinted that there is. Eustace, is not

the time come when you should take me into your confidence? I wish to share all your troubles, and if this secret is a trouble to you, let me share it.'

'My dearest Clara, there is a secret, as I have often told you. But it is not one which I can reveal to you. On the day when I came of age my father took me into a certain room at Strathtartan and told me the secret; and at the same time he made me make two promises: one that I would never reveal it to anyone except my eldest son; the other that I would tell it to my eldest son on the day he came of age, and exact a similar promise from him.'

'And Senlac knows it?'

'Yes, of course.'

There was a silence. Lady Lillebonne sat down on an iron seat; her husband sat

down beside her. An old, bent working-man sat down beside the earl.

‘I think it is very hard,’ said Lady Lillebonne, ignoring the third occupant of the seat, ‘very hard and wrong, that my son, a young fellow, and my own son, should be told what I am not considered worthy to hear.’

‘Clara,’ said Lord Lillebonne, with one of his occasional outbursts of self-assertion ; ‘never speak to me in this way again. The secret is not to be told to you.’

And then silence ensued. The working-man began to speak.

‘That’s a fine paper you’ve got in your hand, guvnor ; that’s the kind of thing makes people think twice. It’s a rare un, that *Moon*, for pitching into them hairy-stock-rats. It ferrets out all their little

secrets, like what you and your missus was talking of just now. If that there Earl of Rosecake has got a secret it 'll be ferretted out by the light of the *Moon*, and you may tell him so, with my compliments. We all know who is meant by the Earl of Rosecake—roses and lilies, and daffydown-dillies—and some of them hairy-stock-rats will find their heads rolling in the gutter one of these blooming days, and no one taking the trouble to pick them up.'

'I think we will go back,' said the earl to his wife.

As they walked away they heard the old man muttering, 'them blooming hairy-stock-rats.'

'Will you go to Hyde Park?' asked the lady.

'No, home,' said the earl.

‘Clara was too much vexed with the *contretemps* of last night to care to come out to-day, poor girl. And Flora went for a walk with Anderson.’

‘Is there any use in protesting again?’ was Lillebonne’s question to himself.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FÊTE AT RICHMOND.

Thy dress was like the lilies,
And thy heart was pure as they.

LONGFELLOW.

‘BUTTERCUPS’ was sold. Felix Vereker felt that he was getting on. A bright prospect unrolled itself before him of fame and fortune and position; of such letters as A.R.A. and R.A., and even of a possible P.R.A. Two sitters came to the studio besides Lady Flora de Vere: one was a fashionable doctor, whose re-

commendation would mean success ; the other was a quiet old lady with scores of descendants, all of whom might also wish to be painted. Felix had only to go on and win all that he wished.

What, even Lady Flora? Yes, he thought so. He believed that he had won her heart already, but there were other difficulties to be overcome besides her shrinking bashfulness. Her father and her mother were tangible obstacles in the way of his true love.

As the portrait of the girl grew towards completion, Felix felt that, if he was ever to confess his love and ask for hers, he must do it now. He could not do it in his own studio, that would not be right ; he was never in her father's house. How was he to speak to her? Fate was pro-

pitious to the young artist, and opened a path for him. A man's love is whetted, not damped, by difficulties; and the difficulty of finding time and place for his declaration made him resolve to seize the first opportunity which should offer. Vereker had lately perceived that he was being borne on the rising tide towards a shore which he had hitherto looked on as a garden of the Hesperides, an Eden, not for him. Society—yes, Society with a large S—was opening its gates to him. Two or three *At Home* cards lay on his writing-table. The fashionable doctor's wife had sent him invitations to all her dances; the quiet old lady had received him as a guest at dinner. How that wanderer, Coleman, would have scoffed, had he been in town, to see Vereker in light

kid gloves, with an orchid in his button-hole, getting into a hansom at 10.45 p.m., and driving off to Lady Greenish's house in Upper Brook Street! Fortunately, Coleman was still in Devonshire. Felix thought that very shortly he must give up the studio to Coleman, and take another place for himself nearer to Eaton Place and Upper Brook Street.

Being a very good-looking young fellow, with unexceptionable manners, those ladies who happened to make his acquaintance at Lady Greenish's dances were anxious to invite him to their houses. Lady Greenish herself liked to have a number of young men in tow after her and her niece. She asked Felix if he was engaged for the 30th of June.

'I think not,' he replied.

‘Because I have permission to take anyone I like to Mr. Merivale’s great *fête* at Richmond, and I shall be very happy to get you a card.’

Felix supposed that Lady Lillebonne and her daughters would be at this great *fête*, and he accepted Lady Greenish’s kind offer.

Various complications arose out of this *fête*. There could be no doubt as to its object. Flora had refused the insipid Merivale’s proposal more by manner than by word, and he was not willing to regard himself as finally rejected. He still thought that, if he spread out his devotion and his wealth before the girl’s eyes, he would succeed in winning her heart.

To do this in the best way possible he organised a magnificent entertainment at

his cottage near Richmond. When he drove up to Lord Lillebonne's house and left a note at twelve noon one morning he flattered himself that the note would alter his fate. For Merivale, though a very wealthy man, a very stupid man, and a very 'old-maidish' man, was as capable of strong emotion as a poor, a clever, and an unconventional man. It is not only among the struggling and the ill-dressed that passion and sorrow make their homes. Princes have pined for love; millionaires have known the bitterest grief. There is as much romance with rank and money as with poverty and bad grammar. Mr. Merivale was as seriously in love with Lady Flora Vere de Vere as Henry Coleman was with Edith Crane.

Lady Lillebonne immediately accepted

Mr. Merivale's invitation, notwithstanding Flora's remonstrances.

'It is not fair to him!' the girl cried, 'he will think that I mean to have him, after all.'

'And I mean you to have him, after all,' said her mother.

'I won't go!' declared Flora.

'You shall go,' said Lady Lillebonne; and Flora went.

The invitations said 'From five o'clock to ten.' These hours were fixed in order to include tea for the early people and supper for the late people. Some royalties intimated their intention of attending, and there were other persons, such as Felix Vereker, who were brought in by some roundabout path. Felix would not have accepted Lady Greenish's introduc-

tion had he not thought that Flora would be at the *fête*.

The 30th of June was a glowing summer day; steady unclouded weather, just tempered by a light, westerly breeze, shone upon Merivale's great undertaking like a good omen. The gardeners and the housemaids, the confectioners, the marquée men, the wine merchant, the pyrotechnist, the Hungarian band, the gas-fitter, and fifty other caterers of things pleasant to the eye, or good for food, were busy all day inside and outside Mr. Merivale's house. They did their work well, for they were well paid. By four o'clock all the arrangements were complete.

As the clock of Richmond church struck five, the first dowagers arrived at the

house; they were invited to tea and to supper, and they might as well partake of both, having ordered no dinner at home. But Lady Lillebonne was too wise to come early. A man wants that which is difficult to obtain. If he thought that Flora was not coming at all, he would be the more enraptured when she did appear. So Lady Lillebonne and her daughters drank tea at home, and then about half-past five the carriage came round, and they were driven down to Richmond.

How these ladies were dressed is of little consequence. Lady Clara was in a mixed costume of pale blue and rose-colour, and a lovely hat of blue ribbon and roses. Flora wore a white gown, and a small bonnet trimmed with mignonette; she had put a couple of la France roses

into the front of her dress. Clara thought natural flowers vulgar, but Flora braved the imputation of vulgarity. The countess was resplendent in a brown satin, brocaded with gold thread, and a parasol trimmed with white Brussels lace. Mr. Merivale was very glad when at last he saw them enter the long low drawing-room in which he received his guests.

Felix Vereker also gave a sigh of relief when he saw the ladies step from the drawing-room window on to the lawn. The band was playing divinely, there was that gentle *susurrus* of refined voices and exquisite toilets which is as music to the ear. The sun shone through thick trees, the breeze came rustling across the river. It was a Watteau picture, an idyll. The tea and cakes were served at small tables dis-

persed about the grounds ; at six o'clock sandwiches and claret-cup were gradually substituted for the lighter refreshments ; at eight o'clock cold chicken, lobster-salad, soup, and champagne began to appear, and by nine the early dowagers were able to eat such a supper as quite compensated for the lack of dinner.

Merivale was bound to pay special attention to the royalties ; but as soon as they had departed he devoted himself to Lady Lillebonne and Lady Clara ; not, mark you, to Lady Flora. For though he was a slow-witted, heavy man he was not without common-sense. He said, ' Oh, ah, exactly so,' and ' No doubt,' ' You are right,' ' Precisely,' to everything which Lady Lillebonne affirmed ; and she became more than ever determined that Flora should

marry him. He would make an excellent husband ; Flora would be able to twist him round her little finger.

In the meantime, Flora was upsetting all her mother's plans. She had managed to escape when Merivale was leading Lady Lillebonne to the claret-cup, and to join a party of girls whom she knew. While with these friends she was startled by the sound of a voice which she did not expect to hear, and turning her head she saw Felix Vereker. The rich blood instantly suffused her face, he saw that he was not unwelcome. He spoke of the weather and the beautiful grounds, and the usual commonplaces ; and then it happened, as it often happens when both parties are willing, that Felix and Flora strayed away from the other girls, and found

themselves in a *solitude à deux*. There was was a 'plot of rising ground' on which grew a weeping ash, and beneath the ash was a rustic seat, and from the ash were to be seen lovely glimpses of the grounds and of the river. And the great beauty of this ash was that no one could approach it from any side without being seen by the occupants of the bench.

'This is very pleasant,' said Felix, standing beside his companion who had seated herself, 'it is a charming *fête*.'

'Delightful!' said Flora; 'so many people.'

'Almost too many. This is the first time I have been at one of these big society functions, and been really brought in contact with what the vogue of the day calls "smart people." It is not often that poor

artists are suddenly launched into fashionable life. I rather like it, though of course I am quite a fish out of water.'

Flora thought him an ornament to any society, so she said,

'I suppose these entertainments are much like the parties given by middle-class people.'

'Yes,' replied Vereker, 'with a difference.'

And then he grew silent, wondering if he dare say what he wanted to say. He let his eyes rest on her, on the brilliant face set in its radiant hair, on the simple white gown and the *la France* roses; she was a Venus, no, an angel, pure and sweet. When he saw that his prolonged gaze embarrassed her, he removed his eyes, and spoke again.

‘Lady Flora, your portrait is finished, I am sorry to say.’

‘Sorry!’ she answered, quickly, ‘surely you ought to be very glad that your task is over.’

‘No, I am sorry, more than sorry. These sittings have been the happiest hours of my life. And now they are ended, and life must go back to its dull routine. Perhaps it would have been better for me if I had not been so happy.’

Flora only played with the tassel of her parasol.

‘Of course I know I am a presumptuous fool; an unknown, struggling painter from America comes to London, and by a lucky chance is chosen to paint the portrait of the most beautiful girl in England, the daughter of an earl; and he so forgets

himself that he ventures to love her, and to dream of a life spent with her at his side. Anyone hearing his story would tell him that he is an ass.'

'Oh, no,' whispered Flora.

'A ridiculous ass. Girls of the old English nobility don't marry unknown artists, they marry in their own pale, and very rightly too. Their fathers and mothers are too wise to let them marry beneath them.'

'But it is not beneath,' said Flora.

'And now the sittings are at an end, and the painter fellow will see no more of his sitter; only, before they part, he can't help telling her that she is the loveliest and dearest woman he ever knew.'

There was passion and pathos—both

words mean *suffering*—in Vereker's voice ; he was almost choking.

Flora put out her left hand ; he seized it, and clasped it, and held it. Then he sat down beside her, and his arm gave her the support which she needed, for she was greatly agitated.

‘ I don't see how it can be,’ the girl said, sadly,

‘ Nor do I. Fancy me the son-in-law of an earl !’

‘ I don't think my father would mind so much as my mother. Poor dear mother, she does so want me to be rich. You see we are poor. I left her just now with Mr. —with a man——’

‘ Mr. who ?’ cried Felix.

‘ Well, Mr. Merivale—how can I tell her ?—she will be dreadfully angry.’

There was alarm and dread on Flora's face ; Felix felt that he had done a rash thing.

‘ It will be too great a trial for you. Forget what I have said.’

He jumped up impetuously.

Flora did not move.

‘ It will be very trying, but it must be done. At least, I must tell her that I cannot think of Mr.—anybody else. And you will have to talk to my father, and he will protest!’ she added, with a laugh.

‘ Yes, I must speak to Lord Lillebonne at once, there shall be no delay. He shall not say that I have used any deception. Will you tell him that the portrait is finished and that I shall be glad if he will come and look at it, and be sure that he approves. I will stay in the studio every

morning, until your father has been to see me. Coleman is still away, and we shall have it to ourselves.'

'But don't you think that it will be best for you to speak to my father before I speak to my mother? I am so cowardly.'

'My poor darling!' cried Felix, 'no, you are the bravest of the brave!'

Then they began to compliment each other, and to wonder when this mutual regard took its rise in their hearts; and they speedily arrived at the stage when every sentence is 'don't you remember the day?' and 'I thought you never looked so lovely,' and 'I did so wonder why you said that.' And the afternoon passed into evening, and still they sat beneath the ash; lost to sight, but hear-

ing not far off the rustle of dresses and the restrained laughter of the guests; and yellow and red lamps began to appear among the bushes, and a Roman candle shot up into the deep-blue air.

‘We really must be going,’ said Flora, running lightly down the slope of the mound, ‘and it is chilly.’

To rejoin Lady Lillebonne without exciting her suspicions, was now the task. Luckily, they saw Mr. Merivale with the Duchess of A——. Flora and Felix smiled at each other, and followed in the footsteps of the other couple as if they were all one party. Presently Merivale caught sight of Flora, and saying, ‘Oh, ah, exactly so,’ to her grace’s remark, managed to change partners; and so it came to pass that Felix Vereker found

himself escorting a real live duchess to her carriage. She was a short, stout, elderly woman, and always easily taken by a new face, especially a handsome one. She chattered away to Vereker, who put her into her brougham, and then stood aside when the host approached to say good-night.

‘Good-night; such a delightful afternoon. Who is he?’ said the duchess.

‘Oh, an artist; I think his name is Vereker.’

‘Bring him to see me; he will do.’

The brougham drove off; Merivale turned and looked at Felix.

‘Mr. Vereker, I think?’

‘That is my name. What has become of Lady Flora?’

‘ She has joined her mother and sister.’

Vereker hoped that Lady Lillebonne would suppose that Flora had spent that long hour in Merivale’s society. He did not wish to precipitate the storm which must break, sooner or later, over the girl’s head. Ten minutes’ hunting showed him that the only party in which he took any interest must have left the place, probably by the improvised gate in the fence. At all events, Flora was gone, the light was gone, everything was gone.

Felix felt outrageously hungry ; nothing improves the appetite like happiness. He sought for chicken and lobster and champagne, and then he sought for Lady Greenish, and sat and talked to her with such brilliancy, with such sarcasm, and

such knowledge of the world, that she was quite enchanted. Having no daughters, there was no *arrière pensée* to interfere with her enjoyment.

The sun set. Felix went home by train. In the studio he turned up the gas, and sank on his knees before Flora's likeness. Could he choose a better place for his thankful devotions than the shrine of all that was purest and best? As the Catholic finds his worship aided by a picture of the Virgin mother, so Felix found that he prayed and praised most fervently when he gazed upon the symbol of God's greatest blessing—a good and loving woman. With such a woman as his wife he could be a better man than he had ever yet been. There was no reason why Flora

should not be his wife, unless it were the absurd pride of her parents. And, most certainly, such pride could be no just impediment.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTER THE LAST OF THE SITTINGS.

A sudden, bold, and unexpected question doth many times surprise a man, and lay him open. Like to him that, having changed his name, and walking in Paul's, another suddenly came behind him and called him by his true name, whereat straightways he looked back.

FRANCIS BACON.

THOSE two articles in the *Monday Moon* had made some sensation, a fact which rejoiced the heart of their author. When he read of Lord Lillebonne's still-born Bill in the House of Lords, Augustus Tothill rubbed his hands with glee. He

had made that proud peer shake in his shoes, he had established his hold on a rod by which he could, at any time, castigate the haughty earl; he had, as he believed, made himself feared by one member of the aristocracy, and consequently by the whole peerage: 'for they all hang together, and together they all rise and fall,' said Tothill.

Of course Tothill knew nothing of the protest, nor indeed did anyone else except Mr. Ashdown, the courteous clerk. But the short discussion in the Upper Chamber on the subject of privilege, though it had fallen flat, had been reported, and Tothill attached more importance to it than it really possessed; as we always attach a fictitious importance to matters which concern us personally.

Then again, the author felt that his threat, conveyed, like a wasp's sting, in the tail of his paper on 'Strathplaid Tower,' must be most terrifying to Lord Lillebonne. At any moment that deadly secret, which all the world knew to be shut up in the bosoms of the earl and his eldest son, might be discovered and published to all the world. Tothill had set himself to the work of discovering it; he was searching through all the books dealing with the private histories of noble families. It is quite possible that had he been a man of better position himself, he might have recognised traces of the flaw in the history of the de Veres; but he skimmed over the dangerous places in their archives without noticing that the ice cracked beneath his feet.

Yet, futile as were Tothill's attempts to injure Lord Lillebonne, they were quite enough to vex him. He fretted over them as he sat in his study, and he winced under the anonymous blows. As the weeks went on, those scandalous papers—which as a matter of fact contained nothing scandalous—were forgotten. A highly-spiced divorce case, a picture which only men were allowed to see, the sudden collapse of a joint-stock company managed by some of the most 'pious' men in England, these things had washed out 'Vale Rather' and 'Strathplaid Tower' from every mind save the two who could not possibly forget. As Lillebonne often said, he had deep worries and woes. He sat in his study bewailing them, when his daughter Flora entered. She had a strange manner; excited yet

reticent, as if she had something special to say, but could not bring herself to say it.

‘What do you want, my child?’

‘Are you busy?’

‘Not particularly. What have you to say?’

Flora stood behind her father’s chair, and arranged the thin locks which still decorated his skull. Then she kissed his forehead.

‘Been extravagant, young lady?’ said the father; ‘do you want a little cheque?’

‘No, thanks, dear father. I only want to tell you that I met Mr. Vereker at Richmond yesterday——’

‘How that young fellow is getting on! Really, in these days, Society is open to everybody. Why, not very many years

ago such a man as Merivale himself——
By the way, I hear that you treated Merivale very nicely, very nicely indeed.'

Flora was silent.

'Your mother thinks that you are coming round, after all. It would make us very happy, my love.'

'That can never be,' said Flora, sharply;
'never, never.'

The earl was silent.

'And I wanted to tell you that Mr. Vereker says the picture is finished.'

'Oh, I will go and take a last look at it. Then it must be framed; the birthday is drawing near. We will go to Willow Green to-morrow immediately after breakfast. Yes, thanks to my taking him up, Vereker is getting on well. I was surprised to hear of his being at Merivale's.

He may go on now to the top of his profession. It would be an excellent thing for him if he were to make a good marriage. A wife of some position and some means would help him on wonderfully.'

Flora had changed colour, growing very red, and then very pale, but her father did not see her face, for she was still behind his chair.

'I like to encourage genius when it is deserving,' he continued; 'be ready tomorrow immediately after breakfast.'

Felix Vereker had hardly quitted the studio since that day at Richmond. He expected Lord Lillebonne to call on him, and he had made up his mind that, come what might, Lord Lillebonne should not leave the studio without hearing the story of his daughter's engagement. The stout

heart of the young man was like melting wax when he thought of the suffering which might soon come upon Lady Flora. He expected rage and fury unutterable, or uttered in violent abuse, and unpleasant as that sort of thing would be for Felix, it would be a hundred-fold worse for the beautiful and gentle girl. But Felix did not quite understand the caste of Vere de Vere.

One morning there came a letter from Henry Coleman, short as his letters were wont to be. It announced his return within a few days, the pictures which the alderman had ordered being now finished. This letter troubled Vereker; he had actually been enquiring about studios in Melbury Road which he found was quite beyond him, and he had heard of some

large top-storey rooms near Charing Cross, occupied by artists. Also on the Thames Embankment towards Chelsea, there were suitable flats. What about Coleman? Coleman was an excellent fellow, for whom Vereker felt the warmest regard; but Coleman and Flora occupying the same flat struck Felix as an incongruous idea. A joint household of Lady Flora and Edith Crane? impossible. And yet to part company from old Coleman and put him aside—him, the friend of Rome and Paris and the Academy classes—it would be a caddish thing to put him aside. Well, they must wait a little.

While Felix was thus musing, and lazily working on the family portrait, there came a knock on his door, which opened, showing the face of Edith Crane,

very pale, except for two bright bits of colour on the thin cheeks. She came in and looked round, as if for a seat. Felix quickly brought her a chair, for he saw that she was tired and weak.

‘And what do you want, young woman?’ he said, with a smile.

‘Oh, Mr. Vereker, I know it is very wrong to come, and mother said you would not think any the better of me for doing it, but I do so want to know if you have heard from him?’

‘From whom?’ Felix said, pretending to wonder.

‘Why, Harry, Mr. Coleman. It is nearly a month since he wrote to me, and I am so afraid he is ill. That would be the worst of all.’

‘He is not ill, Edith; he is not the sort

that gets ill. I had a letter from him this morning, and he was perfectly well, and intending to come home this week.'

'Oh, I *am* glad,' said the girl; 'I think father would like to see him once again.'

Felix was startled.

'Is Mr. Crane worse?'

Edith began to cry. Felix went on with his work, not knowing what to say.

'We've done everything we could think of. He has had gallons of cod-liver oil, and all sorts of nourishment. And the district lady brought her brother to see him, and he is a doctor. And the minister sends port-wine for him, and he has had everything. But he does not get any better. His bones are through his skin. And he does so want to see Harry, I mean

Mr. Coleman; and I do think he would be better for seeing him.'

Felix was much moved.

'Harry will be home in the course of the week; but, my dear Edith, I do not think that Harry or anyone else can do much for your poor father.'

'We know he must die before long,' the girl said, with another burst of tears. 'Oh, it is all so black. And he keeps on thinking that if he had one thing or another he would get better. But we can't get everything for him, can we?'

'No. And of this you may be sure, Edith, that if he had everything that this earth could procure he would not really be better. I am so sorry for you, Edie, dear, pretty little Edie.'

As he spoke he put his arm round her,

as a brother might do, and his lips touched her forehead. How could he better express his deep sympathy with the betrothed of his friend?

At that very moment the door was pushed open, and the face of Lady Flora de Vere looked into the room. She saw what gave her the most violent shock that she had ever received in her life. Her lover embracing a little shabby girl! She stepped back, and trod on the gouty toes of her father who began to mutter.

‘There, good-bye, Miss Crane, I’ll give Mr. Coleman your message.’

And Felix turned to greet his aristocratic visitors. He was not pleased to see them at this moment. He seized the family portrait and hid it from Lord Lillebonne’s disdainful eyes; he pushed Edith

out of the reach of Flora's jealous eyes. He had not thought that such fierce passion could glow in the sweet eyes of his beloved. A very bad quarter-of-an-hour ensued for both him and her.

Flora believed that she had detected Felix in some low *amour*; and Felix could not at present say a word of explanation. Lord Lillebonne supposed that the young artist had been entertaining a sweetheart, a sister, or a model; among people of that class even a kiss did not mean very much. In his youth the earl had once kissed a barmaid. He felt no particular horror at Vereker's occupation. The artist was nothing to him.

Flora marched across the studio to where the portrait of herself stood on an easel — Coleman's easel. All her blood was up,

all the Norman and pre-historic blood of the de Veres. She glanced at her presentment. How could the man who professed to love Flora de Vere condescend to look at a vulgar little thing such as that girl who had just escaped from the room? The girl was crying. He was deserting the girl.—Flora made a whole disgraceful and pitiable story of the relations between Felix Vereker and the weeping girl. He had lost himself, he had lost Flora. She heard him talking to her father, but she said no word.

‘I understand that my daughter’s portrait is finished, so I thought I would call and see it for the last time, and then if you will kindly get it framed and have it sent home to me on the 2nd of July I shall be greatly obliged.’

‘ I will do so,’ said Felix, who felt himself to be in the most awkward position imaginable : bound to ask at this interview for the hand of the earl’s daughter, who through an unfortunate accident was unjustly angry with him. He saw her stand for a few moments with the haughtiest of manners before her picture, then turn and glance at the back of the family portrait, and then move towards the door.

She said to her father as she passed,

‘ I don’t think I am wanted here any longer. I don’t feel very well. I will go down and wait in the carriage.’

Felix looked on blankly. He could put all this right in a few minutes, but just at the moment he was in a predicament. So puzzzled and so vexed was he that he did not offer to escort Flora to the carriage

until she was out on the stone staircase; then he ran after her, crying,

‘Allow me!’

‘No!’ said Flora; ‘no, sir, I will not allow it. Go back and talk to my father.’

Felix obeyed, feeling like a criminal ordered to execution.

Lord Lillebonne, in his blissful ignorance of the state of affairs, was looking at his daughter’s portrait and maundering on about tone and values, in a way which would have amused Felix if his mind had been at ease.

‘So I think the transaction is nearly at an end; and if, as I said just now, you will kindly see to the framing of it, and arrange for it to be sent home to me on the

2nd of July, I shall be greatly obliged. I am sure Lady Lillebonne will be delighted with it. There is a tone about the work which pleases me; after all, tone is the chief thing in a picture. And the values, too; it seems to me that you have preserved them very well. The figure comes away from the background. As soon as I receive the picture,' continued the earl, beginning to hem and haw a little, for he felt that Vereker was not a tradesman, though cheque and receipt must be exchanged between them, 'I will at once send you—a cheque, that is to say—I need not cross it—and if you will kindly include the price of the frame in your—in fact, in your—add it on, that is to say—I can include it in the cheque.'

‘I will do so,’ answered Felix, in whose heart there was ‘if any calm, a calm despair!’ ‘Be so good as to cross the cheque *London and Westminster*; I have an account there.’

‘Thank you, I will,’ said Lillebonne; ‘and allow me to say, Mr. Vereker, that I am pleased, very much pleased.’

‘I am very glad to hear it,’ said Felix, grimly.

‘Very much pleased. And so, good-morning. I do not think I have any more to say.’

‘My lord,’ said Felix, ‘I have something more to say.’

Lord Lillebonne turned upon the young man a curious glance of amused and surprised questioning. What more could the artist possibly have to say?

It was no time for beating about the bush.

‘Lord Lillebonne, will you give me your youngest daughter to be my wife?’

CHAPTER XIX.

LOVE AND DUTY.

I am not ignorant how much nobility
 Flows in your blood, your kinsmen great and powerful
 In the State
 I shall be studious,
 Madam, to give the dignity of your birth
 All the best ornaments which become my fortune.
The Lady of Pleasure. JAMES SHIRLEY.

AT these words of Felix Vereker's, all that
 was in Lord Lillebonne's character showed
 itself plainly in his face. His noble blood,
 his pride, his truthfulness, his strong tem-
 per held in by self-control, his nervous

vanity redeemed by his fatherly affection. At that moment, Felix conceived a higher opinion of the earl than he had ever before felt for him.

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Lillebonne, as if he had not heard.

‘I know,’ cried Felix, rather wildly, ‘that it is a bold thing on my part to ask for your daughter, but I love her, and she loves me.’

‘Indeed?’ said the earl, in the same questioning tone; ‘what makes you think so?’

‘Think! I know it. Could I mistake my own feelings?’

‘Oh, *your* feelings, sir, I do not venture to question them. But when you assert that you know my daughter’s feelings, sir, I protest, sir, I protest.’

It was Felix who grew redder and warmer ; Lillebonne grew paler and calmer.

‘ My lord, Lady Flora has confessed to me that she loves me. I have it from her own lips.’

‘ You are under some strange delusion, Mr. Vereker ; perhaps you are not aware that Lady Flora de Vere has consented to—in fact—to allow the attentions of another gentleman.’

Lord Lillebonne conjured up a vision of the insipid Mr. Merivale, and felt that it could not bear comparison with this handsome, brilliant young fellow. But an artist—a nobody—an American—a man without family or money—why, he must be mad.

‘ I am under no delusion,’ said Felix ;
‘ at Richmond, at that *fête*, I spoke to your

daughter, and she ended by acknowledging that she likes me, and by promising to be my wife.'

'My good sir,' rejoined the peer, still preserving his repose of manner, 'you must be aware that such an alliance is utterly out of the question. What have you to offer? My daughter has a right to expect a great deal from the man she marries.'

'She would have a great deal of affection from me. Of course I know how much she would give me. I am aware that your family is one of the oldest and noblest in the world. I can see that Lady Flora is beautiful, amiable, everything that a woman should be. But I can't see that her good qualities are reasons why you should make her miserable. There are

artists who rise to be the chosen friends of kings and queens ; I am American, but I can be naturalised in England. Many American girls marry English dukes.'

'True,' said Lord Lillebonne, with a sarcastic smile ; ' but English girls of rank do not marry American artists.'

'Let your daughter be the first. It will be a noble example for her to set.'

'I really think, Mr. Vereker, that we are wasting time. I have said that I cannot hear of any such alliance as you honour me by proposing. I need say no more. The motto of my family is *Verily*.'

With a superb air which showed the de Vere blood, Lord Lillebonne began to go towards the door. Felix stopped him, and poured out a flood of eloquent expostula-

tion ; why should true hearts be separated ? What are rank and wealth when weighed against love and happiness ? All the arguments used by lovers since the world began came rapidly and incoherently from Vereker's lips. To all that he urged, Lillebonne made no further rejoinder. He had spoken *Verily*, and there was nothing more to say. It was impossible for Felix to imprison this silent man in the studio ; the appeal must be made to Lady Flora herself.

Forgetting ceremony, and even courtesy, in his eager passion and pain, Felix flung wide open the door and rushed out, flying down the stairs at a breakneck pace. Lord Lillebonne followed deliberately, and so gave the young man a minute alone with

Flora. He rushed at the brougham, and began to talk through the open window, careless whether the coachman heard him or not.

‘I’ve said it, Flora, I’ve said it!’

‘Said what?’ she returned, with the coldest manner.

‘I’ve told your father that we are engaged.’

‘Then, Mr. Vereker, you have made a great mistake.’

‘How so? We are engaged.’

‘We *were*, but not now.’

‘And why not now?’

‘Ask yourself; you know best.’

Lord Lillebonne was just behind Felix, who now put out his hand, trembling like an aspen-leaf, and opened the door of the carriage. This second blow to Felix was

far worse than the first. It could not be that his innocent salute of Edith Crane had estranged Flora from him.

‘Home!’ said Lord Lillebonne to the coachman.

‘One word!’ cried Felix; ‘hear me! You are mistaken! It is all right. I can explain everything.’

The coachman perceived that ‘some little game was hup with that young hartis’ feller,’ and whipped up his horse and disappeared round the corner, carrying behind him two bitterly mortified hearts, and leaving one nearly broken on the hot pavement.

Lord Lillebonne did not speak for some time; it was hardly worth while to speak of the impertinence to which he had been subjected.

‘That young man has had the impudence to assure me that you are engaged to him. Of course, it is not true.’

‘Oh no, it is not true,’ said Flora.

But there was something in the girl’s sweet eyes and rosy lips which gave her father a pang of anxiety. Perhaps there had been some tender passages during those many sittings. He had been a fool not to think of such a possibility. My lady must sound Anderson on the subject. Besides, Flora had said that she was not engaged, and that settled the matter; for the de Vere motto was *Verily*. Flora’s feelings when she hid herself in her own room were most painful. Felix had treated her shamefully; there was some thing especially bitter in being ill-treated by him. For she knew that she had de-

scended from the pedestal of her rank when she engaged herself to him. And to find that he preferred a little common girl out of the street to the Lady Flora Vere de Vere was the bitterest of trials. Her pride as a loving woman, and her pride as the daughter of a noble family, were both deeply wounded. She remained tearless and enraged until the gong sounded for luncheon; then she ran down in a violent hurry to her father's study, and whispered to him,

‘Daddy, not a word of all this to my mother—nor to Clara.’

‘No, my love, no!’ He was evidently much upset. ‘I shall not come in to lunch.’

Flora could hardly touch any food, and, when her mother asked the reason, she

answered that the weather was so hot and depressing.

Hot and depressing it was, with a pile of dark clouds in the south-east as if a storm were coming up. Felix Vereker could hardly breathe. He had stood on the pavement watching the Lillebonne brougham until it turned the corner into Willow Green, until the voices of Mr. and Mrs. Quekett fell upon his ear, and slowly pierced his brain.

Said the woman, 'It is not every young gent what has *two* young ladies coming to see him in one morning.'

Said the man, 'It's very agreeable to a good-looking young feller when the gals run after him.'

Said the woman, 'It may be agreeable, but it ain't right. Let him stick to one ;

that's enough for any decent man. And too much too.'

Said the man, with hearty assent, 'Too much too.'

Said the woman, 'I don't hold with a gal keeping company with one man coming and going up to the room of another man. Mr. Howland says it's quite the talk of the town that Edith Crane is going to marry that Coleman. And how would Coleman like his gal to be carrying on with Vereker, I just ast you?'

The man could not reply, but shook his head vigorously. Vereker saw that he had been wrong all round. He struck his head with his fist, and went up to the studio.

By all the rules of romance this *imbroglio* between Felix and Flora ought to

sever them for a time, and only be cleared up at the end of the third volume. But, in real life, people do not act according to the rules of romance. Consequently, Felix took what was the most straightforward course, and wrote to Lady Flora. His missive was in no sense a love-letter, and therefore no confidence is betrayed by printing it.

‘DEAR LADY FLORA,

‘A very intimate friend of mine, Henry Coleman, also an artist and the joint occupant with me of this studio, is engaged to be married to a young girl named Edith Crane, the daughter of a postman. She sat to me for my picture “Apple Blossoms,” which was in the Advance Gallery. She came to me this

morning to ask for news of Coleman, who is painting in Devonshire, and to tell me that her father is dying. I endeavoured to comfort her as best I could, and while I was giving that comfort you walked in. If you do not quite believe all this, you can go to Edith's home and make enquiries. Here is the address: 17, Little Long Street, Goldhawk Road, Shepherd's Bush Green. Mrs. Crane was, I believe, a servant in your family before she was married. I will not write another word until I hear from you that you are satisfied with this explanation.

‘ I am truly yours,

‘ FELIX VEREKER.’

Having posted that letter, Vereker felt that he had nothing more to do this morn-

ing; he went to the river-side and took out a boat, though he saw that a heavy storm was pending. It came up shortly, and he pulled under a bridge for shelter while the lightning flashed about him, fencing at him with its polished blades and making him wince. Presently the storm had passed away; Felix took a long pull in his damp garments and became thoroughly warm, and then returned on shore. He did not think that there could be an answer from Flora until next morning, and he did not care to return to the studio. He thought he would dine early at the bay-windowed eating-house, and go to a theatre, and so pass the evening.

On this very day it happened that Augustus Tothill came to dine at this same eating-house. He entered the coffee-house

just as Felix was finishing his dinner. They spoke, Tothill with his usual vulgar familiarity, Felix with a careless indifference. Tothill was delighted to dilate on all that he had done while absent from London, on the stories heard at Mont Veraye, and on the legends learnt at Strathtartan.

‘Of course you read my articles?’ he said.

‘No,’ said Felix.

‘Well,’ said the author, slightly vexed to find that Vereker had not been deeply interested in the *Monday Moon*, ‘there will be others forthcoming even more exciting. That skeleton at Strathtartan may not be Lillebonne’s own particular skeleton, but he has a skeleton and I mean to unearth it. And that closed door at Strathtartan

is a curious fact, lasting into this latter part of the nineteenth century, ain't it now? Fancy a clause in every lease and sale of the castle that the door must never be opened! It makes one creepy even to talk about it.'

Felix hardly replied to what Tothill said; he was too much occupied with his own affairs to care about even the de Vere skeleton; Flora was no skeleton. Felix finished his dinner and rose, saying, 'I am going into town, so good-night, Tothill.' He thought that perhaps Tothill might return the borrowed sovereign. But no coin appeared.

'I begin to-morrow my three-volume novel,' said the author; and the artist nodded, and went off to a theatre in the Strand.

Next morning came a note :

‘DEAR MR. VEREKER,

‘I suppose I must accept your explanation. I am very anxious and unhappy. Perhaps you had better come and see me.

‘FLORA V. DE VERE.’

By half-past ten he was in Eaton Place.

Flora had spent a very anxious night. About a quarter-past ten she went down to her father's study, having Vereker's note in her hand. Lord Lillebonne had breakfasted and was now looking over the newspaper. He did not want a girl's fancies and follies to come breaking into his calm like rough waves breaking into a still reservoir.

‘What is it now, Flora?’

‘I have had a letter from Mr. Vereker. He says it was all a mistake.’

‘So I understood yesterday,’ replied the earl, testily.

‘I mean that I was mistaken in thinking that he did not care for me. He does care for me, and for nobody else.’

‘Dear me!’ sighed Lord Lillebonne, ‘then why does he go on worrying you?’

‘I don’t think you quite understand,’ said the girl, seating herself on the arm of her father’s easy-chair; ‘don’t you see, you dear old stupid—that I——’

‘You don’t mean that *you* like *him*!’

‘Ah, but I do.’

‘But, Flora, what can you mean? What did I hear you say to him yesterday at his own door?’

‘ Oh, I know, I said I was not engaged to him ; but it was false. I am engaged.’

Lord Lillebonne looked in his daughter’s face with a blank horror on his own. The thing was impossible, it could not be.

‘ No, Flora, you are not engaged to him ; you could never marry him.’

‘ I shall never marry anybody else !’ she cried, springing from her perch into the middle of the room, and standing there looking like a beautiful, dangerous wild creature suddenly brought to bay. Her father felt afraid of her. He gazed at her alarmed more than angry.

At that moment a long and loud peal upon the knocker of the hall-door sounded to them like the knell of fate ; they fixed their eyes upon the door of the room,

Flora knowing, and Lillebonne guessing who had thus thundered. The girl flung open the door and went into the hall. There was Vereker, in his morning suit, calm and smiling, and anticipating no evil.

‘Here I am,’ he said, gaily, ‘always obedient.’

But the faces of the earl and his daughter, even the face of the young footman, expressed evil.

‘What is the matter?’ said Felix.

‘Be so good as to come into my study,’ said the earl.

Felix walked past Flora, following her father. Coming down the stairs with a rustle of garments was Lady Lillebonne, and, behind her, Lady Clara. In half a minute’s time these five persons were

standing together in the study ; all of them fiercely excited, for by this time Felix had perceived that matters were not to go pleasantly.

‘ You sent for me,’ said Felix to Flora.

‘ She sent for you !’ exclaimed Lady Lillebonne ; ‘ and pray, who may you be ?’

He looked at Flora, thinking that she would answer for him ; but she did not ; she quailed beneath her mother’s scorn.

‘ My name is Felix Vereker ; Lady Flora de Vere has done me the honour to accept me as her future husband.’

‘ This is some mistake,’ said Lord Lillebonne ; ‘ my daughter could not engage herself without my consent.’

‘ And my consent she would never have,’ said the countess.

‘This seems great waste of time,’ said Lady Clara, breaking in with a lofty air, as if ashamed of the discussion; ‘why don’t you simply tell the young man to leave the house?’

‘I shall not go unless ordered to do so by Lady Flora herself.’

Felix put out his hand, a shapely hand with filbert nails, and invited Flora to lay hers in it. But she was too timid at present; and she did not quite know whether she had forgiven him for his embrace of Edith Crane. All that she could do was to gaze at him with an expression of utter perplexity.

They were all mightily perplexed, both at what had happened, and at what might happen. Lord Lillebonne stood at his writing-table; he felt that he should lose

height if he sat down ; he also felt a sort of power in being near his pen and his paper-cutter ; he could awe Flora with a flourish of his pen, cut her out of his will with the ivory sabre. His position seemed judicial as he stood there.

Lady Lillebonne remained standing in the middle of the room. She was aware that her pose was impressive and her figure majestic. No young man of Vereker's calibre could fail to be moved by the sight of such a queenly woman ; no young artist could venture to look on her as a mother-in-law.

As for Lady Clara she had placed herself close to the window ; the sash was raised and she leaned or sat against the inner ledge whereon had been placed that morning some pots of mignonette. Behind

her were the dirty shrubs of the so-called garden, and the brown walls of the stabling. The puppy occasionally made flying visits to the garden and barked at the sparrows which did not cease their twittering for him or for anything.

Felix was just within the door and Flora beside him. They seemed shut off from the others, as if they were intentionally isolated, as if they two were against all the world. There was a curious silence, during which the puppy uttered a ferocious bark of glee, and the clock on the chimney-piece took the opportunity of ticking most obtrusively.

‘This visit,’ said the countess, with her head on one side, ‘is quite unwarrantable; it is a shameful intrusion.’

‘I have come, madam,’ said Felix, not at all awed, ‘to ask you and Lord Lillebonne to consent to your daughter’s marriage with me.’

‘You have had your answer; it is *no*.’

‘I am of the same opinion,’ said the earl, stabbing the blotting-paper with the point of the sabre; ‘all that I have to do is to refuse my consent.’

Flora drew a little nearer to Felix.

‘Are you aware,’ said the artist, ‘that Lady Flora’s happiness depends on your consent?’

‘Do tell me, somebody,’ cried Clara, in a shrill voice, ‘who is this extraordinary person who wants to marry Flora; who is he? Where does he come from? How did she come across him? Why does she

want to marry him? The whole thing is like some ridiculous riddle, and if there is an answer I should *so* like to know it, for I am not good at guessing riddles.'

'I am also in the dark,' said Lady Lillebonne, with her head on the other side; 'who is this gentleman, and how has Flora made his acquaintance?'

'My dear,' said the earl, with a confidential tilt of his chin towards his wife; 'don't you remember meeting Mr. Felix Vereker at the private view of the Advance Gallery in April? Flora has been giving him sittings for her portrait, and I regret to say that he has taken advantage of the confidential interviews——'

'Good heavens!' appealed the lady; 'confidential interviews! When and where?'

‘In my studio, madam, at Willow Green.’

‘Anderson was always there,’ said Flora, in a low tone.

‘Anderson, indeed! I thought she was trustworthy.’

‘And I thought,’ sneered Lady Clara, ‘that Flora had taken a very strange fancy for long walks of a morning with Anderson. But I see it all now.’

‘And I see it plainly, too;’ Lady Lillebonne bent her head forward; ‘this dutiful and conscientious daughter, under pretence of having her portrait painted, has been spending her mornings in the studio of a young man at Bethnal Green, not ashamed to tempt him on with her rank and wealth, and not ashamed to

offer him her hand as a bribe. And she has taught a trustworthy young woman like Anderson to play the part of traitor, and to sit by and look on at these hours of disgraceful flirtation, while her poor mother thought she was walking for healthy exercise, and her poor father——'

The poor father had made several attempts to interrupt his wife's harangue; he now succeeded.

' Clara, listen; Clara, I will speak, you shall listen! I knew that Flora was going to the studio. I arranged it. It is a birthday present for you. I took her to Willow Green.'

Lady Lillebonne threw up her hands as if throwing up the sponge. She gazed around her with an idiotic smile, staggered

in the direction of a chair, and sank into it with ease and grace.

‘*You* arranged it; *you* took her. Oh, Lillebonne!’

‘I never thought of his making love to her. By George, it never entered my head. Why should he make love to her? The hair-dresser does not make love to her, nor the bootmaker, nor even the doctor. So why should this young man? I never was more astonished in my life. And if the matter thus placed before me requires any more categorical denunciation from me, I have only to say that I regard such conduct as emphatically a breach of privilege, against which I shall take the earliest opportunity of protesting.’

The peer sat down.

Felix Vereker felt that this scene had lasted too long. Nothing could come of this kind of talk. He stepped forward, right up to Lord Lillebonne, and, looking him full in the face, spoke on this wise:

‘I am quite aware, my lord, that I am not what the world would call a fitting match for your daughter; I am not an English peer, though I have good blood in my veins, and a family portrait in my possession. I am not rich, though I think I have in my profession the means wherewith to earn money. As far as I know, I have no claim to marry your daughter except that I love her, and I don’t think there is any reason why she should think of marrying me except that she loves me. I perceive that you are not going to con-

sent to our marriage, and therefore there is no use in my remaining any longer in your house. But before I go I am anxious to hear from Lady Flora herself what she wishes me to do.'

'You must go,' said Flora, very gently.

'Yes. And does our engagement hold?'

'Oh, yes.'

'What!' shrieked Lady Lillebonne, 'will you marry in defiance of your parents' commands?'

'No,' said Lady Flora.

'Will you obey your parents? Will you marry the man whom they select for you?'

'No,' said Flora, 'I will not disobey my parents by marrying the man whom they disapprove; and I will not be false

to myself by marrying any man but him to whom my heart is given. I don't suppose I shall ever marry anybody. Felix, we must wait !'

She put out both her arms to her lover, who caught her in his and held her tightly strained to him, while six scornful eyes looked on. There, in defiance of the caste of Vere de Vere, the artist dared to embrace the girl whom he loved, and she dared to allow his embrace.

'This is too much !' cried the countess, 'too much, before one's very eyes. Young man, leave the house this minute ! Girl, go to your room !'

Flora, with an outburst of sobs and tears, stumbled upstairs to her room, threw herself upon her bed, and sobbed

into her pillow as if her heart would break.

Felix bowed and obeyed. He got home as quickly as he could, his heart hot within him. He stamped up and down the floor in front of Flora's likeness—that likeness which had been such a labour of love in the painting, but which now served to goad him to desperation with its sweet, calm beauty smiling upon his rage and impatience. He took up his palette-knife and made as if he would cut the canvas to pieces. He threw the knife across the room, and put his lips to the lips of the portrait. Then he began to laugh and to scoff at himself, and to comfort himself with the assurance that he and Flora and Love together must in the

end prove stronger than Lord and Lady Lillebonne and Pride; just as the warm sun in the fable proved stronger than the cold wind.

CHAPTER XX.

A LITTLE TACT PUTS ALL STRAIGHT.

With a little hoard of maxims preaching down a daughter's heart.

TENNYSON.

HER lover had been turned out of the house. She was the most unhappy girl in the world. Her filial duty, and her duty to her lover, were so opposed that there was no possibility of their ever being reconciled. She would not call down upon herself the curse of her parents by marry-

ing in direct disobedience to their commands; neither would she be so false to her own heart as to discard the man whom she loved, and who loved her. His conduct during that short, but stormy, scene in the earl's study had shown her Felix Vereker at his best. He had been calm and dignified and determined; if she had loved him before, she adored him now. There was no reason why she should be jealous of the girl, Edith Crane, whom she had seen him—well, comforting; nor of that picture which he so carefully turned with its face to the wall whenever she entered his room. Oh, no, she had nothing to be jealous of; he loved her as devotedly as she loved him.

As to the future?—it was very dark. Her parents would never consent to the

marriage, and she would never marry without their consent; therefore she would never marry. All her youth would pass by in vain aspirations after happiness; 'her maiden bloom would wither there in a living tomb;' perhaps an early death would release her from her trouble; more likely, she would live on to be a gentle old lady with white hair and a broken heart. All this day she wept at intervals as she lay on her bed or sat at her window; she took up some embroidery and set a few stitches in it, but salt water is not good for delicately coloured silks. She took up a half-read novel, and found in the sorrows of the heroine many points of similarity to her own. The heroine in the third volume married the man of her choice. This seemed to Flora a good omen:

She plucked up courage, and was able to eat the dinner which was sent up to her.

No one felt this affair so bitterly as did Lady Lillebonne. It outraged every fibre of her heart. Her family pride, her personal pride, her motherly pride, her hopes, her plans, everything which was dear to her, was violently attacked by this extraordinary proposition. Felix Vereker's proposal for Lady Flora's hand seemed to be a living enemy with claws and horns, tearing down and tossing up the very bulwarks of Lady Lillebonne's life. She was restless and unhappy, this poor lady; there was a necessity of pouring out her woes, and of expressing her indignation. The first person to whom she addressed herself was her husband.

‘Eustace!’ she exclaimed in a sepulchral voice, and when she called him by his Christian name he always trembled; ‘Eustace! You are bitterly repaid for your evil deeds. Oh, you need not tell me that you did not expect such trouble would come of them. But when you act without my advice, keeping such an important secret from me, you may be sure that your treachery will not prosper. Yes, I know that you only kept it secret because you wished to surprise me on my birthday; but no surprise, no birthday present, can repay one for having been deceived. Besides, had you gone to such a man as Herkomer, or Sant, or Millais, none of these dreadful things would have happened. She could not have got engaged to a married man.’

‘They are so expensive,’ said Lord Lillebonne.

‘Then why think of a portrait at all? The simplest brooch or ring would have done as a mark of affection; I want a parasol very badly. Indeed, no present was necessary now, Eustace, after more than thirty years of married life. I have long ago ceased to buy you birthday presents. And now, as to the future. I shall, *of course*, give orders that Mr. Vereker is never again admitted within these doors. Then I shall write to Mrs. Pettit and desire her to put Mont Veraye in order as quickly as possible; and as soon as it is ready I shall take Flora down there and devote myself to breaking her proud spirit. For I am afraid she has more than her share of the de Vere pride, to say nothing

of the Willoughby obstinacy. You know *we* are obstinate. I shall not take Clara to Mont Veraye. I shall leave her here with you until Sir Ronald has made his final proposal. When he does that we will invite him to stay with us at Strath-tartan. We will have a family gathering there in August ; and if Mr. Merivale will join us there, we may very likely arrange for two weddings. Have you nothing to say ? Do you not approve ?

‘ Oh, quite, entirely, perfectly. I was only thinking that this young man has really committed a serious breach of privilege. I will go to the House and consult Mr. Ashdown as to whether it will be wise for me to enter a protest. When it comes to unknown American artists wanting to marry the daughters of peers, it

is high time that some protest was made.'

'Eustace,' said the lady, 'you will do nothing of the kind. You will *not* expose our domestic troubles to Mr. Ashdown or anybody else. You will not breathe a word about that Vereker to any living creature. I will tell you what you will do this afternoon. You will take Clara to Lord's. Leave the carriage outside ; you are more likely to meet people if you are on foot. If you do not see Sir Ronald there, then drive to the Park ; but I think he will go to the match, he is fond of sports. At all events, wherever you see him, bring him back to dinner. Tell people that Flora is not very well, and that I am staying at home to take care of her. If Mr. Merivale hears that it will

have a good effect on him. Nothing touches a man so much as hearing that the girl is ill. Now, do you think you understand my directions? As to protesting and such nonsense, I utterly forbid it.'

'Yes, Clara, I understand,' said his lordship, meekly.

'And now I go to my other duties. Please ring the bell.'

The bell brought the young footman, Miller; and Lady Lillebonne, as she walked into the hall, gave him her orders.

'Miller, I daresay you noticed that gentleman in the light coat who was here this morning?'

'Yes, my lady.'

'Mr. Felix Vereker.'

‘Yes, my lady.’

‘If ever that gentleman should come to this house again and ask to see anyone belonging to the house, you are to tell him that you have strict orders that he is not to be admitted.’

‘Yes, my lady.’

‘Not to be admitted on any pretext whatever. Do you quite understand?’

‘Yes, my lady.’

‘Very well; and give Benwell the same orders which I have given you.’

‘Yes, my lady.’

‘Now, send Sinfield to me.’

‘Yes, my lady.’

The butler received similar orders. He had a profound contempt for artists in general, and for that Vereker in particular. Miller and Benwell had been in-

clined to admire Vereker's good looks and light coat.

'Your ladyship's directions shall be carefully carried out,' said the butler.

Lady Lillebonne then sought her eldest daughter, who was running over some new songs in the drawing-room. Outside, the weather was lovely; a soft wind rustled the awning, and carried indoors the scent of the flowers in the balcony. For a moment the countess felt that the country must be very pleasant to-day; Worcestershire, with its green fields and blue hills, would be delightful after dusty London. Ah, if only the affairs of her two daughters were settled! Only mothers know what mothers go through.

'Clara, you are going with your father to see the match at Lord's this afternoon.

Try to bring Sir Ronald back to dinner.'

'I will,' said the young lady; 'what *can* Flora be thinking about?'

'Oh, Flora is too bad. If she chose to play with this young man just to amuse herself—well, that might be inconvenient; but actually to want to marry him, oh, it is beyond everything!'

'I never thought of marrying such people,' said Clara, with conscious virtue.

'No one but an utter idiot would.'

'If he were rich, would that make any difference?'

'Rich, really rich,' said the countess; 'I don't say but that thirty or forty thousand a-year might make a difference. If he had a large income he would not be painting portraits for his living. He could not be a poor artist and a rich man at the

same time. Clara, no more Laurences for you, I trust. Let this season see you engaged to Sir Ronald Stanley. Mrs. Greenwood Archer told me that he was really quite tipsy the other night at Mr. Cromwell Greenwood's ball. And we were at Marlborough House. If we could only have known! But we will get him to Strathtartan in August. We have some very fine whisky there.'

'We shall see,' said Clara, turning back to the piano, and striving once more to catch a B natural; she could take B flat easily, and her heart was set on being able to take B natural.

Lady Lillebonne now went up to the second bed-room floor. There was a room consecrated to Mrs. Anderson and her arts, and there sat the young-ladies' maid, tack-

ing lace to some of Lady Clara's bodices. She rose and stood like a sentry when the countess appeared.

'Anderson, I used to think you a sensible, well-conducted young person; I am very much disappointed in you.'

'I am sorry, my lady.'

'I can't understand how you could see that presuming, forward young man flirting with Lady Flora, even making love to her, and yet say nothing to me about it.'

'I did not notice any flirtation or love-making, my lady,' replied Anderson, with her usual calm; 'had I seen anything of the kind, I should have thought it my duty to name it to Mrs. McGusty.'

'You might have named it to myself, Anderson; I don't much care for maids gossiping together. I wish to know now

what really did take place between Lady Flora and Mr. Vereker. Used he to pay her compliments?’

‘I never heard any, my lady.’

‘Did he press her hand very warmly?’

‘I never saw it, my lady.’

‘Did he look at her in a peculiar manner?’

‘Not that I noticed, my lady.’

Really, Anderson was impervious to everything.

‘Had they any opportunities of flirtation?’

‘Yes, my lady; when Lady Flora sent me downstairs to get tea.’

Then Lady Lillebonne began to understand how the thing had been; and she began to curse tea as she had never cursed it before. She had often blessed tea for

its fragrant and stimulating properties, and now she cursed it for the shelter which its leaves had afforded to the bold lover. Oh, tea! how many crimes are committed in thy name! Cursed is the woman who invented afternoon tea! Had not Anderson been sent out of the studio to prepare afternoon tea, Vereker would never have been left alone with Flora, and could never have made love to her.

‘It is a very unfortunate affair,’ said Lady Lillebonne, ‘for Mr. Vereker. It will result in his losing our patronage. And Lady Flora has been much upset by his insolence. You will see that Lady Flora has her meals properly served to her to-day; and to-morrow I have no doubt she will feel better.’

The countess then crossed the landing to

the door of her younger daughter's room, and entered without knocking.

Flora sat by the table, looking very woe-begone. Her embroidery with the moist stitches, and her novel with the heroine made happy in the last chapter, lay beside her. Her tears were over for the moment; and her mother's sudden entrance acted like a tonic draught upon her feelings.

'Well, my love,' said the countess's iron will within her velvet voice; 'that distressing scene being over, I hope you are better.'

Flora did not answer.

'It will not occur again. You must have gone through a great deal lately. I am glad that matters came to a crisis at last. Country air will do you good. You and I will go down quietly to Mont Veraye,

and join the others afterwards in Scotland. In Worcestershire you will be safe from further persecution, and you will be able to forget this misguided young man.'

'I have not been persecuted,' said Flora ;
'and I shall not forget him.'

'Fie, my love, fie ! You must be a good child and do what your loving parents think best. Dear Clara, what an excellent daughter she is. She intends to accept Sir Ronald.'

'Mother !' said Flora, rousing herself ;
'do you know that he drinks ?'

Lady Lillebonne shrugged her shoulders.

'He is very well off. By-the-by, do you think it possible that Mr. Vereker can have a large private fortune ? Most Americans are enormously rich. That

might account for his presuming to think of you.'

'I am quite sure,' replied Flora, enjoying the hopelessness of her position, 'that he is very poor indeed. He has always said so.'

'That makes matters all the easier. There is no difficulty in getting rid of a man of low birth who is also a pauper. Let me kiss you, my child. This tiresome episode will soon be forgotten. We will all be so happy in Scotland. Clara will be engaged to Sir Ronald, and you will have forgotten the artist.'

'I shall not forget him,' said Flora.

'Now, my darling, don't make me angry. You will forget him.'

'Not until he forgets me.'

‘Ah, if it depends on that! You are an obstinate child. But the Willoughbys are obstinate as well as proud, and the de Veres are as proud as Lucifer.’ Lady Lillebonne forgot for the moment that Lucifer’s pride had a serious fall. ‘I will write to Pettit to prepare Mont Veraye for you and me. We will run down with just M’Gusty and Anderson and Miller, and spend a delicious week under the Malvern Hills. Good-bye, my child; as you are not well to-day, your meals shall be sent up to you. I do not suppose,’ she added, turning back when at the door, ‘that wretched young man will have the effrontery to write to you. He must know that everything is at an end.’

And Lady Lillebonne went away, feeling that a little tact puts everything

straight, and pluming herself on having a great deal of tact. And yet she had just committed the indiscretion, the vulgarity, of speaking of her daughter's love-affairs to her daughter's maid. No greater solecism was ever perpetrated. Fortunately, Anderson was more tactful than the countess, and did not tell to others what she had been told.

CHAPTER XXI.

A GREAT CHANGE.

We are all sentenced to capital punishment for the crime of living.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

FELIX VEREKER was not ashamed of loving Flora de Vere; nor was she ashamed of loving him. On the contrary, they were mutually proud of loving each other. Loyalty, constancy, endurance, all the higher virtues, are called into play by an unfortunate affection. 'Am I not the nobler

through thy love? Oh, three times less unworthy !' A happy engagement is enough to raise a man high in the spiritual scale ; an unhappy engagement makes him a hero and a saint.

Felix saw at present no outlet from his difficulties ; it seemed as if the unhappy engagement might run on for ever. He felt pretty sure that some very lucky turn of Fortune's wheel, such as an enormous legacy, or the production of a picture about which England went mad, might so alter his worldly position that Lord and Lady Lillebonne might find him on almost their own level, and be willing to give their daughter to him. But such turns of Fortune's wheel do not happen when they are most needed. He knew very well that no one would leave him an enormous

legacy ; and he knew that he would never paint a picture good enough or bad enough to turn the heads of all England. He made up his mind to wait quietly until patience should achieve what Fortune could not do.

He wrote to Lady Flora, just a few lines, saying that if she thought their prospects too dreary he would give her back her liberty ; but if she felt as he did she would wait on for ever, as he was willing to do. In reply to this Flora wrote that yes, she would wait ; but if ever he grew impatient he must tell her so, and she would release him from his promise. He rejoined with assurances of unchangeable devotion ; and she returned asseverations of fidelity never to be shaken. By the end of the first week it had become an established custom

for these young people to keep up an unbroken correspondence ; Felix wrote every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday ; Flora replied to him every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. No parent would dare, in these days, to enquire as to a daughter's letters ; and Flora was allowed undisturbed enjoyment of pen and ink.

One day, just as Felix was thinking about dinner, a four-wheeler struggled to the door of the Willow Green Studios, and out from it emerged Henry Coleman, his Gladstone, and half-a-dozen canvases. A strange bustle on the stairs, the vinegary voice of Mrs. Quekett and the oily voice of her husband, informed Vereker that his chum had returned from the wild west. And Harry burst into the room, with a picture in either hand, and so sunburnt

a face that his old friend hardly recognised him.

‘Hullo, Vereker, how are you? Oh, this London in July after the moors, and the valleys, and the trout-streams, and the shimmering seas! You miserable cockney who have been toiling away on the inane beauties of the fashionable world, while I have been inflating my lungs, and stretching my legs, and delighting my eyes among some of the very fairest scenes of God’s own painting! I have had a high old time, indeed.’

‘I am very glad to hear it,’ said Felix; ‘profitable too?’

‘Yes; the alderman has been at Lynn Abbey, and has highly approved my work. He has paid for the three pictures which he ordered, paid like a Briton. These are

sketches and studies which I hope to work up at home.'

'You did not trouble yourself to write very often,' said Vereker.

'No need. I wrote sometimes to the Cranes. I am a bad hand at writing.'

'Edith has been here once or twice,' said Felix, 'to ask if I had heard from you.'

'I am a bad hand at writing ; she knows that. Is her father any better?'

Vereker shook his head.

'Poor old chap ! I'll go there one day and see them.'

'Harry,' said Felix, rather sharply, 'are you still engaged to Edith Crane?'

'Of course I am ; why do you ask?'

'I wanted to know ; people take things so differently.'

Felix had assumed a careless air as he took a cloth and flicked off some specks of dust from the portrait of Lady Flora, and looked critically this way and that way at the folds of the drapery. Harry's eye was caught by the picture, and he went to look at it.

‘What is this, Vereker? Who is this young woman?’

‘Lady Flora Vere de Vere. I am very nearly satisfied with it.’

‘A deuced pretty girl. Commission?’

‘Yes, but I don't think I shall be paid for it.’

‘How's that?’

‘Circumstances have arisen, during the painting of this picture, which have made Lord Lillebonne very angry; and I strongly suspect that it will be left on

my hands. If so, I shall have nothing to regret.'

'Don't you want your money?'

'Not for this picture. The circumstances to which I allude are these: Lady Flora came here to sit to me; the portrait was to be a surprise to her mother; the earl came with her sometimes, but more often her maid. In fact, Coleman——'

'In fact, it's the old story; you fell in love with your fair model, and she told her papa, and you were ignominiously dismissed from your position as family portrait-painter, and the young lady is now the bride of another.'

'Not at all,' said Felix; 'she is engaged to me.' He then told Coleman as much of the story as a man could tell his friend.

‘It is a bad business,’ he finished by saying, hoping that Coleman would contradict him.

‘Yes, it is,’ said Harry; ‘a very bad business.’

Presently they adjourned to the riverside inn and dined. They talked long and late. Coleman had been out of things a good deal during his absence. He had not even heard of the ‘Mont Veraye’ and ‘Strathplaid’ articles in the *Monday Moon*. Tothill did not appear this evening; Vereker had not seen him for some time, and wondered what mischief he was hatching.

The next morning was spent by Coleman in looking over his sketches in oils and water-colours, and in planning magnificent pictures at magnificent prices. In

the afternoon he went to see the Crane family.

Little Long Street looked especially dreary on a hot, summer day. Dust lay thick on the roadway and the pavement; cabbage-stalks and pea-pods were profusely scattered about; dead flowers had been flung out of windows. The doors of the houses stood open, revealing sordid interiors; bare-headed children sat on the kerb-stones; rough-headed women gossiped together. Not that every interior was sordid, or every woman a rough-headed gossip; but the general tone of society in Little Long Street was of the sordid and gossipy type. Henry Coleman was not very pervious to outside influences, but he felt the unsavouriness of this place deeply enough to make him

very anxious to take Edith Crane out of it.

The door which he sought was wide open ; he walked up the uncarpeted stairs, until he came to the floor occupied by his friends. There he knocked, and his knock was responded to by Edith, looking very worn and thin ; she said not a word, but laid her head on his breast and began to cry. The situation had its charms, but nevertheless was awkward.

He kissed her white forehead pencilled by the blue veins, and said,

‘ What is the matter, my darling ? ’

‘ Oh, he is so bad ! ’ murmured Edith.

‘ Your poor father ? ’

She tried to keep back another flood of tears.

‘ Worse than when I went away ? ’

‘ Much worse. The doctor says it is no use his coming any more ; he can’t do anything for him ; he can’t last many days ; he wonders he has lasted so long.’

Edith became a little calmer, and wiped some more tears into an already soaked handkerchief. Coleman entered the room where, sitting up in bed, was poor Joseph Crane. He wore a clean night-shirt over which was an old grey shawl arranged like a jacket. Coleman would not have known the dying man. His face was attenuated to an extraordinary degree. Every feature was sharpened and the skin so tightened that the nose and chin seemed to be cutting through yellow parchment ; while on the cheeks were crimson spots, and in the eyes a fiery glare, which appalled the spectator. His

hands were like claws, his voice sharp and rasping.

‘I knew there was some one whispering at the door. Whatever did you do it for? If there is a thing which I particularly dislike you all go and do it. Are you a new doctor, sir?’

‘No,’ said the visitor; ‘I am Henry Coleman, and I am going to marry your daughter Edith.’

‘I thought you might be a new doctor; the one that used to come to see me has not a grain of sense. I remember you now, Mr. Coleman.’

Here a long fit of coughing interrupted the invalid; he was too weak to cough loudly, but the paroxysm shook him and wearied him, and cold beads started out on his pallid forehead; Mrs. Crane wiped

them away; Edith fanned him with an old Japanese fan.

‘Not a grain of sense,’ the sick man went on; ‘instead of giving me physic to strengthen me, he gives me what makes me weaker and weaker. I wanted him to set me up so that I might go to the sea-side; not a bit of it; and he lets me down and down until I can’t rise from my bed. And that woman is as bad as the doctor. She knows the things I like, but she won’t get them for me. A good slice of roast beef, now, and a mince-pie; or a breast of a goose, or a bit of sucking-pig. But no, she brings me her soups and jellies and slops, until I’d like to throw them at her head. I did throw the ox-tail soup at her head,’ he added, with a smile of malignant triumph.

‘I wish I could think of something you would like,’ said Harry.

‘Champagne,’ said the sick man.

‘You shall have it.’

Crane gave a chuckling laugh which brought on another long fit of slow wearisome coughing, during which his wife wiped away the perspiration, and his daughter sprinkled eau-de-Cologne and fanned him gently.

‘Where is Nellie?’ asked Coleman.

‘She has got a little place to look after some children, and she does not come home until eight o’clock.’

‘Where is Arthur?’

‘He is gone as errand-boy to the stationer, where the post-office is.’

‘And baby?’

‘Baby is dead.’

But nobody cried because the baby was dead.

Crane fell asleep. When he slept he looked precisely like a corpse, so white, so drawn, so still. Coleman stole out of the room, and flew along the streets to Notting Hill, where he thought he could find a wine-merchant from whom to buy a bottle of good champagne. It cost seven-and-sixpence. He carried it back, and bore it up to the sick man's room.

‘Here’s the champagne!’ he cried, brandishing the bottle.

‘Ah!’ exclaimed the invalid, raising himself, ‘that is the stuff! That is the tipples to put new life into a man!’

‘Give me a tumbler,’ said Coleman; ‘now, Edith, you hold the tumbler, while I open the bottle. There goes the wire;

now for the cork ; whoa-hoa, my friend ! don't blow your own head off. Softly, softly, there we are. " The foaming grape of eastern France." Now, Mr. Crane, drink your own good health, and take a long pull and a strong pull at it.'

He held the glass to Crane's mouth ; the invalid took a sip, seemed to catch his breath, took a second sip, and pushed it away.

' Don't you like it ?' asked Harry, bitterly disappointed.

' How dare you bring me such wishy-wash as that ? You are like all the others ; you make believe to give me something good, and it's nothing but muck all the time.'

Harry was greatly distressed.

‘ I assure you, Mr. Crane, it is good wine.’

‘ Port-wine is better for me.’

Harry looked at the wife and the daughter ; they shook their heads. He made Mrs. Crane drink some of the champagne, and also Edith. He had the satisfaction of seeing the colour come into their faces ; and he now saw, for he took more time to look at her, how fearfully thin and pale the girl had become during his absence. There was the tightened skin, the glittering eye, the diaphanous hand ; every mark of the disease which was killing her father was reproduced in the girl. Harry’s stout heart sank within him. Nothing could be done for the father ; could anything be done for the daughter ?

‘Does the doctor come?’ Coleman asked of Mrs. Crane.

‘He has not been since last Friday. He would come if we sent for him.’

‘Has he been attending Edith?’

‘No. He did examine her one day, and told her that she must take care of herself.’

Harry sat down by the bedside. He looked at the dying father, who was again in a somnolent condition; at the fragile mother who had taken up her sewing; at the delicate, beautiful daughter, who was smitten by the same disease which had laid her father low. Heredity—yes, one must believe in heredity. Harry felt himself chained to this sick-bed; and yet he could do no good there, and he longed to get away from it. Men are of no use in

cases of sickness, they are only in the way ; it is women who are in their proper place as ministering angels to the sick and dying. Mrs. Crane and Edith were the right persons to nurse poor Joseph Crane ; Harry Coleman was of no use, and had better get out of the way. He was just debating whether he would go at once, or stay another five minutes, when the invalid began to talk.

‘ You’ve been down in the country. I heard that a rich gentleman sent you into the country. Now, if a rich gentleman had sent *me* into the country, it might very likely have done me good.’

‘ I went down to work,’ said Coleman.

‘ I thought you went to sketch. They told me you had gone to sketch.’

‘ Sketching is working.’

‘Working is making boots, or carrying letters. Sitting in a field and dabbing on green for grass, and white for daisies, I don’t call that working. If the rich man had sent me into the country, I might have picked up a bit, and I might have been able to do a stroke of work afterwards. I think now if I had port-wine and change of air I should be ever so much better.’

He rambled on for some time, and then suddenly fell asleep, this time a quieter and more restful sleep than before.

Harry took Edith out on the landing.

‘Tell me, have you everything you want for him?’

‘Yes, everything. The clergyman and the district visitor are most kind. Nothing is suggested which they do not sup-

ply. He has port-wine, and jelly, and the best soup, and custard pudding, and fish, and sweetbread, and strawberries ; he can't take them ; *we* have to eat them.'

'And mind you *do* eat them. Mind you and your mother drink that champagne. It won't keep more than an hour or two if you cork it ever so tight. Edith, my darling, I am afraid you are not well.'

'I am tired,' she answered, 'very tired with waiting on poor father.'

'My love, my love! I will take you away somewhere into the warm country, or we will go to Italy, and you will get well there.'

She smiled a little.

'I can't leave father at present. If he really should grow stronger——' her lip quivered.

Harry rubbed his hand across his eyes.

‘If he is not to get well, then no one can wish him to linger long in this state.’

Those words, always said when hope is extinct, told Edith that there was no hope of recovery for her father. But she could not weep again. She laid her head on her lover’s arm and took a few moments of rest. It was rest to lay her weary head against that strong arm. Harry stroked the soft, rough hair, and was silent. Some minutes passed like this, minutes of wonderful peace for them both. At length there was a little stir inside the room.

‘I think I must go,’ said Harry, ‘I only came home last night from Devonshire, and I have a great deal to do. Edie, I

have lots of money; I want you to take this, and to spend it on comforts for your father and for yourself. I wish you would get a new dress.'

'I don't seem to care about new dresses,' said Edith; 'but I will get things for father.' She took the five-pound note from Coleman, took it very simply, put up her cheek for a last kiss, and returned to the sick-room. Harry went away very quietly.

After that, he called every day to enquire how Joseph Crane was going on, and found him always weaker and thinner. The cough, too, seemed to grow worse and worse. Until at last there came a day when there was a wonderful improvement. The cough had ceased, the skin was a more natural colour; the invalid felt a return of appetite, and enjoyed his food.

He was less complaining, was almost cheerful.

‘I have taken a turn for the better,’ he said, ‘I really feel free from pain, I breathe more easily, I am altogether stronger. What I want now is change; I must have change. The next time you call, Mr. Coleman, you’ll find that I have gone away for a change.’

Harry smiled and nodded. When he called next day, he found that Joseph Crane had gone for a change, for the Great Change, having died at about six o’clock that morning.

CHAPTER XXII.

CHIEFLY ABOUT MONEY.

Thow myghtest better meete myst
 On Malverne hilles,
 Than gete a mom of hire mouth
 Till moneie be shewed.

PIERS PLOWMAN.

THE London season was drawing to a close. Already many people had left town. The Park was almost deserted of an afternoon; holland blinds were permanently drawn down at not a few windows; and the flowers which enlivened

the sills of Belgravia and Grovesnoria, and eke of Tyburnia, had a dusty and unwatered look, as if their owners had ceased to take an interest in them. All the freshness and vivacity of Society had gone off; the champagne was flat; the lights had nearly burnt out. Lady Lillebonne was really giving orders to M'Gusty and Anderson to pack the trunks with garments suitable for Worcestershire.

‘Flora is not well,’ she said, to her eldest daughter; ‘I must take her into the country, and insist on her forgetting that impertinent young man. As for you, Clara, you have played your cards so badly that I don’t think it will be of any use for you even to go to Goodwood. Perhaps you had better go with your father, just to prevent your absence being

remarked on ; but your chances are over for this season, and, at your time of life, a season is a serious matter.'

'I am sure it is not my fault,' said Lady Clara, sulkily.

Her eyes were dull and heavy, her complexion was pasty ; she looked altogether washed out.

'I don't say that it was entirely your fault ; but if Amy Springfield could get him to propose to her, why could not you ? At her best she can't compare with you at your best ; though really this morning you look fifty.'

'They say he was absolutely drunk when he proposed. I *could* not have accepted a man who was drunk. I should have turned away from him in disgust. Amy Springfield might do it. She is a

nobody ; she probably thinks a baronet a great catch.'

'A man of his wealth is a catch. And, as to his drinking, he only occasionally takes too much. He might have many a worse failing. You could have taken him in hand after you were married, and have made him quite sober. You have been a great disappointment to me.'

'We are all disappointments,' said Clara, bitterly ; 'I am sure Flora and Senlac have not done much to please you.'

Whereupon Lady Lillebonne sat down and cried quietly. She was sadly disappointed with her children. They did not do the brilliant things which they ought to do. They involved her in troubles, and did not even sympathise with her. Nor did her husband sympathise with her. He

was perpetually complaining of breaches of privilege, and entering protests against them. But not one useful action did he ever perform. He never added a pound to his income, nor an acre to his property ; he found no suitable husbands for his daughters, and no suitable wives for his sons. He was growing very grey, and had begun to stoop. In other words he was getting old, and yet wisdom did not come with age.

A new trouble had arisen for the earl ; an anonymous letter had put him into a terrible flurry.

‘ The disgraceful secret which you have so long managed to hide from every eye is about to be declared to the world. A last chance is given you, and you may write to “Veritas,” 207, Little Long Street, W.’

He locked his study door and sat poring over this note. The handwriting was good, the paper was excellent ; from whom did it come ? What was the meaning of the word 'disgraceful' ? The secret in the de Vere family involved no disgrace. Who was 'Veritas,' and why should he write in this style ?

'I suppose he wants money,' thought Lord Lillebonne, 'but there is no reason why I should give him any. If he has found out the secret, he has learnt nothing wonderful, and he can't harm me by declaring it. Though, of course, we don't want the old story raked up after its sleeping so many years. Can it be that this scoundrel has got hold of some other secret ? Possibly something which I don't know myself.'

The earl thought a great deal about the anonymous letter, and as soon as Lady Lillebonne and Flora had started for Mont Veraye he sat down and wrote to 'Veritas.'

'The Earl of Lillebonne would be glad to know what is the "disgraceful secret" to which "Veritas" alludes. The earl is not aware that there is any "disgraceful secret" with which he has any concern.'

Having posted this reply with his own hand, he began to consider whether the note from 'Veritas' was not a most decided breach of privilege against which it was his duty to protest. Never, surely, was peer of the realm so harassed by troubles; there was Flora, tied by her own obstinacy to a man whom she could not marry; there was Clara, scornfully rejected by Stanley, to whom she had almost offered

herself; there was Lady Lillebonne worn to a skeleton by the fatigues of the season, and made miserable by the affairs of her daughters; there was Senlac writing for more money; and there was Eustace laid up with another attack of asthma. As the earl mused over his trials, his eyes filled with tears, and he would gladly, at that moment, have changed places with his head-gardener at Mont Veraye, or with his factor Maclaren at Strathtartan, or even with Sinfield the butler; *they* had no anonymous correspondents holding the sword of Damocles over their heads; *they* were not under orders to take a daughter to Goodwood, and there try to make up for the failures of the past season.

A second note came from 'Veritas':

'My lord, no doubt you would be glad

to know how much I have discovered of that which you desire to keep secret. You can hardly expect me to divulge for nothing what is worth a great deal as long as it is in my sole keeping.'

So this was merely an attempt to blackmail! No doubt, had Lord Lillebonne been a man of robust character, he would have put the first letter from 'Veritas' into the fire without giving it a second thought; but he was of a singularly nervous temperament, and there was a flaw in his family history which might at any moment develop into a serious split, enough to destroy him and his belongings. But the flaw had existed for nearly a century, and showed no sign of developing further. He might have lived on placidly to the end of his life had not this 'Veritas' molested

him. The question now arose as to whether he should defy the rascal to do his worst, or buy him off. Buying off rascals is perilous work, as the unhappy earl well knew; and yet it might be worth while to pay almost anything in order to find out what had been discovered. Lillebonne temporised again. He wrote to 'Veritas':

'If you choose to tell me what you think you have discovered concerning me, I will pay you as much as your information is worth. But I never pay for goods until they are delivered at my house.' He thought that was a cutting way of alluding to the secret discovered by 'Veritas.'

Two or three days went by without any rejoinder. Lady Clara and Anderson had designed and carried out some charming costumes for 'Goodwood'; and the father

and daughter, with the discreet maid in attendance, went into Sussex with heavy hearts but showing a brave face to the world.

A good deal more real than Lord Lillebonne's worries were the troubles which beset Felix Vereker and Henry Coleman. Felix received his usual letters from Flora, but they breathed no hope of any improvement in their prospects ; the girl was glad to be in the fresh country ; she had taken up drawing, laid aside while in London, and she hoped to make some studies of the Malvern Hills which Felix would criticise and perhaps approve.

‘It is a hopeless engagement,’ said Vereker to himself ; ‘one of these days we shall have to choose between bringing it to an end, and running away. I should

be for running away; but then I must have a place to run to; and those rooms on the Embankment are too expensive for me to venture on at present.'

Henry Coleman had attended the funeral of Joseph Crane, and had spent a great portion of his recent earnings on necessaries for the widow and children. He was very glad to have the money in hand with which to pay for the funeral and for mourning; he settled various bills for Mrs. Crane, and then he looked at his balance and wondered what he should do next.

'If I had a place to take her to, it would be something,' he said one day to Vereker; 'I have an idea of setting Mrs. Crane up in a lodging-house. I might go and live with them, or we might marry and she

come to my place. Do you understand?’

‘No,’ said Felix; ‘I don’t.’

‘Well, you see, it is this way. If I take a house and put Mrs. Crane into it to let lodgings, I might reserve a room for my studio, and we could all live together. But then should I be able to do good work in a house full of the Crane children, and lodgers, and perhaps the lodgers’ children?’

‘Emphatically no.’

‘Then should I put Mrs. Crane with Nellie and Arthur into that house, and take another place for Edith and myself?’

‘That would be far wiser. But how is Mrs. Crane to furnish her house?’

‘On the hire system. We have settled all that.’

‘Oh,’ said Felix; ‘poor thing, if she

begins by being in debt she will never get out of it.'

'I don't see how else to manage it for her. I could not have the whole Crane family living in my studio.'

'But, Coleman, the widow must be much better off now that poor Crane is gone; why can't she manage for Nellie and Arthur, who both have something to do, and let you take Edith to your own place?'

'Because,' replied Harry, 'I can't let my wife's mother toil on like a charwoman all the rest of her life. I can't take Edith to a comfortable home, and leave Edith's mother in poverty and squalor.'

Felix was working away on a portrait of Lady Greenish's youngest nephew, and Harry on a picture of 'Watersmeet.' Neither

spoke for a few minutes; each had his problem of the future to solve. Presently Felix laid down his brushes.

‘Harry,’ he said; ‘can’t you bring Edith here?’

Harry put aside his palette.

‘With only this studio as her sitting-room, and only that hole’ (pointing to his bed-room) ‘for her other domain? I promised her two sitting-rooms and a back-garden and everything bright and nice; and I would have given them to her by this time, but that her father’s illness and death have absorbed so much of my money.’

‘These rooms are cheap,’ said Felix; ‘if I were to move out of them there would be space enough for Edith.’

‘And where would you go?’

‘I have been looking at a flat on the Embankment, almost facing Lambeth Palace. I believe I must make a move; I did not like to name it before, because it seemed nasty of me, parting company with you, and giving myself airs, and going off to a grander part of London.’

‘Oh, you portrait-painters,’ said Coleman, gruffly, ‘you must do things differently from us landscape daubers. We can afford to be vulgar; you can’t.’

‘Coleman, shut up!’ roared Vereker, flying at his friend; ‘who wants to be fashionable? who wants to be vulgar? If I thought you meant that——’

‘I don’t mean it.’

‘I know you don’t. You can’t mean to taunt me. I’ve made the most fatal mis-

take in falling in love with a girl above my own rank.'

'I'm sorry for you, old fellow. I can't see daylight for you. That old figure-head, Lillebonne, will never consent to your marriage. I dare say your Flora is a jolly girl and all that, but what is to come of it?'

'Nothing that I can see,' groaned Felix; 'perhaps I might have a better chance if I were located in a grander neighbourhood. The mother might think the Embankment better than Bethnal Green, as, Flora tells me, she always call this place. And if I can make matters easier for you by going, why, Harry, I'll go.'

'Thanks,' said Coleman.

Each man lighted his pipe and sat down

opposite his canvas. Now and then one held out a hand stained with pigments, and the other gave it a grasp and let it go again. But they said next to nothing. After a while Harry rose, put on his hat, and went out. Felix knew that he had gone to explain the new arrangement to Mrs. Crane and Edith.

A little later, and in walked Augustus Tothill. He was sprucely got up, and looked quite respectable ; but in his clean attire he was more repulsive than in his former shabbiness ; the glossiness of the snake was very unpleasant.

‘ Yes, I’ve been lucky lately,’ said the visitor, with a smile ; ‘ my little tour in the Midlands and in Scotland has turned out wonderfully well. I laid up material for any number of articles, some of which

have already been published, and some of which are now in type. And there are other ways in which I can earn an honest penny. Your friend, the Earl of Lillebonne, finds that I am a friend—or an enemy—not to be despised.’

‘Have you been bothering old Lillebonne?’ asked Felix.

‘Sir, “bothering” is not a literary word. I hold his lordship in the hollow of my hand, he is at my mercy; I could crush him with a word. He will be a mine of wealth to me.’

‘More than he is to himself,’ muttered Felix.

‘And now I am starting in a new character.’

‘Oh, indeed!’

‘Yes, that of financier. Some of us

literary men are about to become our own printers and publishers.'

'That is not quite a new idea,' said Vereker.

'No,' returned Tothill; 'but we are going to work it in a new manner. I daresay you know the firm of Grindem and Crush?'

'I do not.'

'Well, I do. They have been making a fine business the last few years; so good that a lot of people want to get into it, myself among the number. And, in order to carry on things on a larger scale, they have just made themselves into a Limited Company, and they will pay nine per cent. the first year, and more afterwards. Now, I regard Literature and Art as sisters; so

I have come, out of my friendship for you, to offer you some preference shares in Grindem and Crush, Lim. I could not give you a greater proof of my friendship. You will find that the very fact of your holding shares in that company will mark you out as a man of substance. When you tell old Lillebonne that you are one of Us, he will make no more difficulty about giving you his daughter.'

'Tell me more about the company,' said Felix; 'nine per cent., you say, and more afterwards.'

Tothill showed Felix a prospectus of the new company; very specious, as such prospectuses always are.

'I could tell you a good deal more,' said the author, 'but I don't like to do so until

you have joined Us. There are literary names, and there are names high in the world of Art, and the arena of politics is represented among Us. Take a hundred shares, my dear fellow, on my recommendation.'

'At what price?'

'At one pound each, ten shillings on allotment, and probably no further call. Just write a cheque for fifty pounds, and I'll do the rest for you.'

'Fifty pounds! That is a large sum.'

'Nine pounds a-year for fifty pounds is not to be sneezed at.'

'Not at all,' said Vereker; he was thinking that if he could really get eighteen per cent. for his money this would be a splendid investment. But he mistrusted Tothill.

‘I must look into it further,’ he said ;
‘you know, bankers always say that high interest means bad security.’

‘Bankers are old fossils, old stick-in-the-muds.’

‘Why do Grindem and Crush wish to part with their business if it is bringing them in eighteen per cent.?’

‘Oh, to extend the business. I don’t think, Vereker, you quite understand financial matters.’

‘I am aware that I do not. But, if I were Grindem or Crush, I should not wish to divide my eighteen per cent. with strangers.’

‘You selfish brute!’ said Tothill, with a smile.

‘And then again, with this high interest, what is the security?’

‘Security? Is not eighteen per cent. sufficient security?’

‘No,’ said Vereker; ‘suppose I want my money back again, and suppose the company comes to grief, what security shall I have that I shall ever see my fifty pounds again?’

‘Oh, suppose, and suppose, and suppose,’ said Tothill, impatiently.

‘I want to know what is the security for my principal?’

‘Well, there is the lease of our premises.’

‘A lease is a covenant to pay. I don’t see how it is a property.’

‘Why, because if we should come to grief, which is impossible as long as we are paying at the rate of eighteen per cent., or even nine per cent., I say, if we

should come to grief, we can sublet the premises, and so get the money back for the shareholders.'

'If the premises did not let? If the amount standing in the name of the shareholders should exceed the value of the premises sublet? I don't quite know how to explain myself; but I mean that if the company pays five hundred a year for its premises, and sublets them at the same rental, I don't see where the profit, or the security, comes in.'

'You may well say,' sneered Tothill, 'that you can't explain yourself, and that you don't understand finance. If everyone held the same views that you do, how would these thousands of companies get floated every year?'

'That is just what puzzles me,' said

Felix; 'but I notice that quite as many companies are wound up as are floated every year. And this I say, Tothill, thanking you for your good intentions towards me, that much as I should like interest at the rate of nine or eighteen per cent., I should be still more desirous to have security for my money.'

'You are hopeless,' said Tothill, with a short laugh; 'here, give this prospectus to your friend Coleman; he may have an eye for his own advantage. And, if you get the chance, tell Lord Lillebonne that a little money spent now will save him a great deal by-and-by.'

'Oracular!' said Felix, laughing, 'I am not in the least likely to see Lord Lillebonne. As for Coleman, he is going to

be married to a girl with a very poor mother, and I don't think the capital of the whole lot of them will run to fifty pounds.'

'Poor things!' said Tothill, with the air of a millionaire.

He then took himself away. The atmosphere of the studio seemed fresher when he was gone; and Felix lay back in his chair, thinking that he would not venture his money in any speculation, but would rent that flat on the Embankment, and pursue his present advantages in his profession. Possibly, when Lord and Lady Lillebonne saw him established in handsome rooms, and heard him spoken of as a fashionable portrait-painter, they might consent to his marriage with their daugh-

ter; if not, he would suggest to Flora that the marriage should take place without the consent.

Meantime, the Willow Green studio would be given up to Harry and Edith, and two people would be made happy.

Felix wrote these results of his cogitations to Flora, who read them as she sat in the grounds of Mont Veraye, looking out from rich flower-beds and leafy trees to the grey and purple hills on the further side of Malvern.

CHAPTER XXIII.

VERITAS.

'Tis listening fear, and dumb amazement all :
 When to the startled eye the sudden glance
 Appears far south, eruptive through the cloud ;
 And following shower, in explosion vast,
 The thunder raises its tremendous voice.

Summer. THOMSON.

'NOBODY' is in London in August and September, indeed some millions of 'nobodies' remain in our great city during the whole summer. Vereker and Coleman did so ; therefore they must be held to be 'nobodies.' Felix hardly noticed how

deserted Belgravia had become, for he was much occupied in making an agreement to rent the flat on the Embankment for a term of three years. Everyone who rents an unfurnished house or flat knows how the questions concerning fixtures and repairs cause endless discussion; how the outgoing tenant asks more for his carpets and curtains than the incoming tenant thinks they are worth; how the kitchen range is always out of order, and the drains are never in a satisfactory state. All these preliminary worries of the future householder rose up to trouble Felix Vereker, and to make him regret leaving the cheap, shabby attic on Willow Green.

But in course of time everything got settled; and on the half-quarter-day, 11th of August, he took possession of his new

abode, arriving there with his personal baggage which was not large, and with his professional belongings which were considerable. A charwoman received him, and he felt not a little lonely when he wandered through the bare, desolate rooms.

There was a small drawing-room, unfurnished; next to that was a tiny dining-room containing a carpet, a table, two chairs, and a coal-scuttle. The rooms looked across the river towards Lambeth Palace, and were charming. Behind them was the studio, a dull place with a lofty window; and the kitchen, a dull place with a low window. Beyond them again at the end of a passage were two bedrooms and a dressing-room.

‘They do look a bit dreary, sir,’ said

the charwoman, who always wore a brown shawl and always had a cold in her head; 'but I'll make you a cup of tea in five minutes.'

'No, thank you,' said Felix; 'I am going out to dinner. Make tea for yourself; and when you leave, light the gas in the hall, and see that there is a good fire in the kitchen. At what time shall you come in the morning?'

'I'll come at any hour you like, sir,' replied Mrs. Moods.

'Oh, I like breakfast about nine, coffee, sausage, or egg, or kidney, or something of that kind.'

'I think I know,' said Mrs. Moods, with a smile, 'what my gentlemen like for breakfast.'

Mrs. Moods was a respectable woman

who had the domestic management of several flats ; she possessed a great bunch of keys, and could enter these flats at will ; Vereker thought himself very lucky to have secured the services of a person so well thought of in the neighbourhood. The first two mornings he found his breakfast delightfully cooked and punctually served. Afterwards the cooking became uncertain and the punctuality problematical. Sometimes Mrs. Moods behaved like the best of servants ; at others like the worst of charwomen. Felix felt that, in the matter of comfort, Willow Green Studios and Mrs. Quekett excelled the Embankment and Mrs. Moods. He knew that what he wanted was a companion, a lady who would manage his household. As he walked about the rooms which were

quite empty, and sat down in those which he was getting furnished, he tried to picture how the place would look if Flora were there, with her beauty and her brightness, making life as joyful as a summer dream.

He would start up from these dreams and take down the curtain which commonly hung over Flora's portrait, and gaze on that sweet face; and he would burst into laughter sometimes as he reflected on the irony of Fate. He had been commissioned, as a mere matter of business, to paint the portrait of a young lady; by the time the picture is finished, artist and sitter are engaged, and the young lady's father, very naturally, refuses his consent to the marriage. The picture remains in the artist's possession. Lord

Lillebonne had not written to say what he wished done with it. He had not offered to pay for it. Lady Lillebonne's birthday was past and gone. Flora wrote her usual letters ; pleasant letters, which showed no sign of repenting her engagement ; but there was no hint in them of any near prospect of bringing the engagement to a happy termination.

Felix had no sitters at this time of year. He tried his own portrait, but did not succeed ; he tried Mrs. Moods's, and produced quite a Rembrandtesque old woman. Then he heard from Flora that her father was very much worried by some horrid man, who was trying to annoy him with some painful old family story ; Lady Lillebonne and Flora were about to go to Strathtartan, where they expected the earl

and Clara to join them, and probably Sen-lac would come down for the shooting.

‘Could you not come down there too? You would find some beautiful sketching, if you care for landscape, and I daresay we should sometimes meet out-of-doors. The inn is quite a nice little place.’

Felix felt that he wanted country air after a long spell of London, but he had just been incurring so many expenses that he did not know whether he could afford a trip to the Highlands. He wrote to Flora that he must consider what he could do.

In writing to Flora, no notice was taken of what she said as to her father being worried and annoyed. Lord Lillebonne was always in a chronic state of annoy-

ance and nervousness ; Felix did not suppose that the earl's troubles were greater than usual. But Lady Clara could not help seeing that her father was unhappy, and though she was enraged with mankind in general, and with Sir Ronald Stanley in particular, she so far forgot her own misfortunes as to feel a little anxious about her father.

‘What is the matter?’ she said to him one day, when she found him walking alone in a quiet alley of the beautiful park attached to the house where they were staying.

‘Matter enough!’ sighed the earl; ‘I dread the very sight of a letter.’

‘But why? What do your letters bring you?’

‘They bring threats of disclosures which may ruin us all.’

‘My dear father!’ said Clara; ‘you are nervous. What disclosures are there which could ruin us all?’

Lord Lillebonne took off his hat to cool his head.

‘Perhaps you know that there is a secret in our family?’

‘Everybody knows that,’ replied Clara; ‘but a secret which has done no harm for a hundred years cannot be very dangerous now.’

‘Volcanoes,’ said Lillebonne, putting his hat on again, ‘sometimes are quiescent for a hundred years, and then suddenly burst out and overwhelm the country round.’

The young lady was growing impatient.

‘What reason have you for supposing

that this volcano is now likely to erupt ?'

In reply, the earl seated himself on the root of a grand old beech, and took out of his pocket a bundle of letters. Clara stood beside him, looking on scornfully.

It was a glorious day early in August ; the sky was cloudless and the sun brilliant. You could see the hot air quivering above the brown grass ; the cornfields were golden ; the trees were bowed beneath the weight of their foliage ; the birds were mute, for the time of courting was long past, but the bees kept up a humming which made the air vibrate with a low musical sound. At times a gentle odour of freshness was wafted inland from the sea ; but this Southern England was growing dusty and scorched, and all who could do so turned their faces towards the cooler north.

Clara wanted to go to Starthtartan ; she was out of conceit with London and Londoners ; she wanted to go somewhere away from the regular London set of acquaintances. She felt impatient with everything, and specially impatient and scornful of her father and his nervous terrors.

But when she saw the budget of letters which he began to unfold, her scorn changed into curiosity. There were about a dozen letters all addressed in a very neat hand, but bearing postmarks of various parts of London. ' Willow Green Office ' was the mark on two letters ; ' Notting Hill ' was on two more ; one was stamped somewhere at Islington ; and the others had been posted in the E.C. district.

' From whom are these ? ' asked Clara.

' I don't know ; anonymous.'

‘ If they are anonymous, they are not worth considering. Burn them.’

‘ I can’t, I dare not. There may be some truth in them. Clara, what is that curious noise?’

‘ Only the grasshoppers chirping,’ answered Clara; she seated herself on a curve of the beech-tree’s root, and took the first letter which her father handed to her.

‘ The disgraceful secret which you have so long managed to hide from every eye is about to be declared to the world. A last chance is given you; and you may write to “ Veritas,” 207, Little Long Street, W.’

‘ Nothing in that,’ said Clara.

The second note ran thus :

‘ My lord, no doubt you would be glad to know how I have discovered that which you desire to keep secret. You can hardly

expect me to divulge for nothing what is worth a great deal as long as it is in my sole keeping.'

'Ah, he wants money,' said Clara; 'I hope you did not send him any.'

Lord Lillebonne showed his daughter a third letter; it was only a couple of lines:

'I tell nothing of what I know until I have received some assurance that you intend to treat me properly.'

'Father,' said Clara, looking at him keenly with her beautiful eyes, 'did you answer any of these letters?'

'I answered them all, my dear: it seemed only common courtesy to do so; besides, I should like to know what he has to say.'

Clara's beautiful lips took a more scornful curl, as she read the remaining letters.

3. 'As to terms, you might send a ten-pound note on account.'

4. 'Thanks for enclosure. I am now considering whether it will be best to treat with your lordship, or to put the whole of my information into the hands of the editor of a weekly paper who will know how to bring your history before the eyes of the fashionable world.'

5. 'Yours safely to hand. My information is worth double the sum you name. Indeed, I doubt whether I would now take five hundred. I am putting things in literary form.'

6. 'I could not send you a copy of my article on your family history. Either it must be bought up before it leaves my hands, or it must go to press. Five hundred does not appear to me a large sum.'

7. 'The information which will hurl you from your high estate is just ready for the press. All Europe will shortly ring with it.'

8. 'True, I said five hundred formerly, but now I say one thousand.'

9. 'The man who hesitates is lost.'

10. 'What is a thousand pounds to the pseudo Earl of Lillebonne? Your successor would gladly give me five thousand.'

'There is somebody groaning!' said the earl.

'Wood-pigeons,' replied Clara. 'Father, did you really send this man money?'

'It is absolutely necessary that I should know what he is keeping from me.'

'Are there any more letters?'

'Not at present. Clara, the man may have information which will ruin us. I

have lived in dread of it all my life. My father lived in dread of it. Senlac lives in dread of it. I have only sent three hundred ; and the brute has promised to write me something which will prove that he knows a great deal, and then if I make it up to a thousand he will divulge everything.'

'You should have set the police on him,' said Clara.

'I do not wish to make my private affairs public, or put detectives on the scent of the very thing which I wish to keep hidden.'

'But what is this secret thing?' cried Clara, impatiently.

'Senlac knows.'

'And why does this man call you the "pseudo" Lord Lillebonne?'

‘ Ah !’ said the earl, with a long moan.

Then they saw approaching among the trees their host on horseback with a party of riders, and their hostess on foot with a party of walkers. Lord Lillebonne pulled himself together, and put on his nervous smile ; Lady Clara sprang up, the woman of the world, the beauty, the flirt, once more. They joined the party on foot, and with chatter and laughter they strolled slowly to the house where tea was awaiting them in the wide, cool hall.

And not tea only ; the afternoon post had come in, and letters lay on a side-table. Lillebonne coasted round the walls until he arrived at the table, and saw letters addressed to himself. Clara marched straight up to them. She saw one in her mother’s handwriting, with the Strath-

tartan postmark ; another from Senlac ; and a third addressed in that neat writing with which she had just become familiar. She was consumed with anxiety to know the contents of this last letter ; so too was her father. But the conventions of society kept them both quiet outwardly ; they ate bread-and-butter, they drank tea, they discoursed of the weather and the harvest, and of the approaching prorogation of Parliament. When, at length, there was a general move from the hall, Clara affectionately took her father's arm and led him away to the morning-room, where few persons sat at this time of day.

She closed the door. The earl fumbled with his letter.

‘ Make haste,’ said the girl.

She looked over her father's shoulder as he, with trembling fingers, opened the envelope. Together they read these words: 'You are not the Earl of Lillebonne. I give you that information in return for what you have already sent me. If you wish to know who and where the real man is, you must loosen your purse-strings much further.'

'I won't, I won't!' said Lillebonne; 'I don't want to know. I can't pay any more.'

Clara slowly took in the meaning of the note.

'You are not the Earl of Lillebonne! Is that true?'

'Oh, dear, no. It was all settled in the year 1806. The House of Lords settled it for us. No one claimed, in spite of our

advertisements, and then it was all put straight for us. But the odd thing is that these claims are never quite set at rest. At any moment a "peerage case" may be reopened; a fresh witness turns up, a fresh letter comes to light, even a new expert may be called to speak as to handwriting, and then the thing comes again before the House of Lords. Oh, no one knows the troubles which beset us unhappy peers.'

Lord Lillebonne groaned. And then he remembered that he ought not to have confided his troubles to Clara. It had not been the custom to tell the family history to the daughters of the house; the eldest son was informed of it in a solemn manner on his twenty-first birthday; and the wife generally got to know it; but the daugh-

ters were not told the facts. And yet Lillebonne was quite sure that his aunts and his sisters knew all about it.

‘I did not mean to tell you this,’ he said to Clara; ‘but I must speak to some one. What can I do? What do you advise?’

‘I should advise you not to send any more money to that wretch who is blackmailing you, but to come with me straight away to Strathtartan. The man will not follow you there. Depend upon it, if he had anyone to produce as Earl of Lillebonne, he would do so at once. Besides, how could there be anyone?’

The earl sat on a sofa with his handkerchief in his right hand ready to wipe his brow, bedewed with anxiety, or to wave in expressive gestures.

‘There might be, there might be. I daresay you know how my father’s cousin Francis was killed in a duel at the very beginning of this century.’

‘Well, yes,’ said Clara, somewhat impatiently, “Burke” and “Debrett” tell as much as that.’

‘My grandfather did not marry until six years later, so that my father was very much younger than his cousins. Because, there was another cousin besides the cousin Frank who was killed in the duel. My great-uncle Charles had a son also named Charles, and he it was who had the misfortune to kill his cousin Frank. I have heard that Charles was a very nice fellow, and that the duel was entirely Frank’s fault. They used to gamble and drink in those days to a frightful extent.

Frank was Lord Lillebonne's only son. When he was dead, this Charles who had killed him became the heir. But he had got away and never was heard of again. At the earl's death the question arose, who was to succeed him ?'

'Why, Charles, of course.'

'He could not be found. The Continent was scoured, and India was searched, and advertisements were put in the papers, but nothing was ever discovered about him. So it was supposed that he was dead.'

'Had he a brother ?' asked Clara.

'His brother George had died while at Eton. So, after some years, my father, who was another cousin of poor Frank's, petitioned the House of Lords to grant him the peerage and the property ; and in 1806 they did so. My father was never dis-

turbed in any way. On my attaining my majority, he informed me of the possibility of his cousin Charles having married and left descendants, and I have always lived in dread of some French or German fellow turning up to take everything from me.'

Here the handkerchief wiped the pearly drops from the noble brow which wore so precarious a coronet.

'French or German?' said Clara, rather puzzled.

'It was understood that Charles fled to the Continent, and he might have married a Frenchwoman or a German, or even an Italian.'

'My dear father,' cried Clara, looking straight at him, 'I am sure you need not be alarmed. If that Charles or his possi-

ble descendants wished to claim our peerage, they would have done so long ago. No doubt he died on the Continent, unmarried.'

'But "Veritas" says he can produce the claimant.'

'Wait until he does so!' cried Clara; 'in the meantime, take no notice whatever of these anonymous letters. When the claimant appears, it will be quite time enough for you to be anxious. Let us start for Strathtartan to-morrow. I am sick of these people, just the same set that we have been meeting all the season in London. Mrs. Maclaren will be quite refreshing. Now, have I not cheered you up? Are you not glad that you have told me all that absurd story?'

‘ You are a sensible woman, Clara ; yes, we will go to Strathtartan ; this “ Veritas ” will not pursue me there. If he does, I will protest ; at least, I will if we have that autumn session which people are prophesying.’

Next day Lord Lillebonne and Lady Clara de Vere left Sussex and went to Eaton Place for one night ; then they went on to Scotland. These movements of theirs were duly chronicled by the *Morning Post*, and ‘ Veritas ’ was kept acquainted with the whereabouts of his victim.

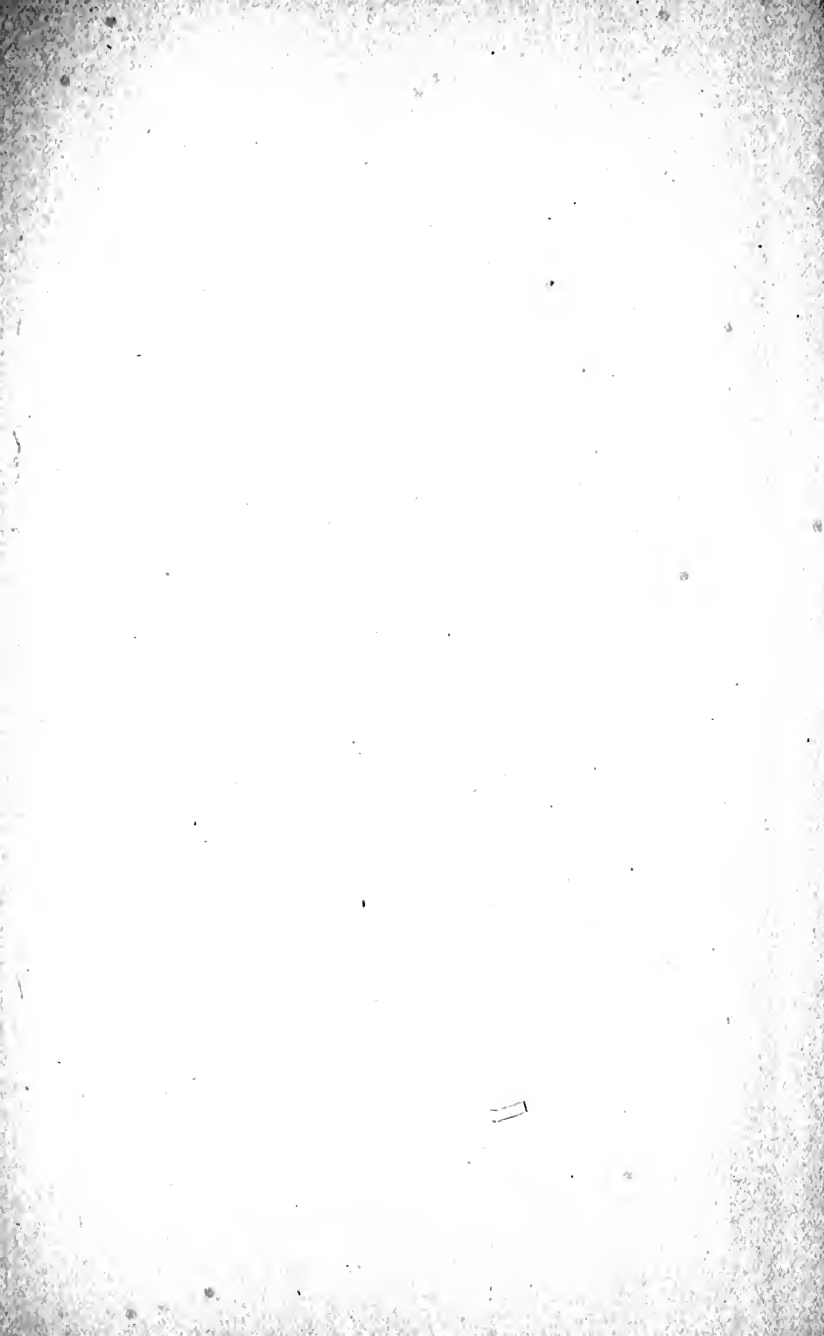
As soon as Lady Clara arrived at Strath-tartan, she sounded her mother in order to discover whether the countess knew anything about the duel in the year One, of which the effects were only fully realised

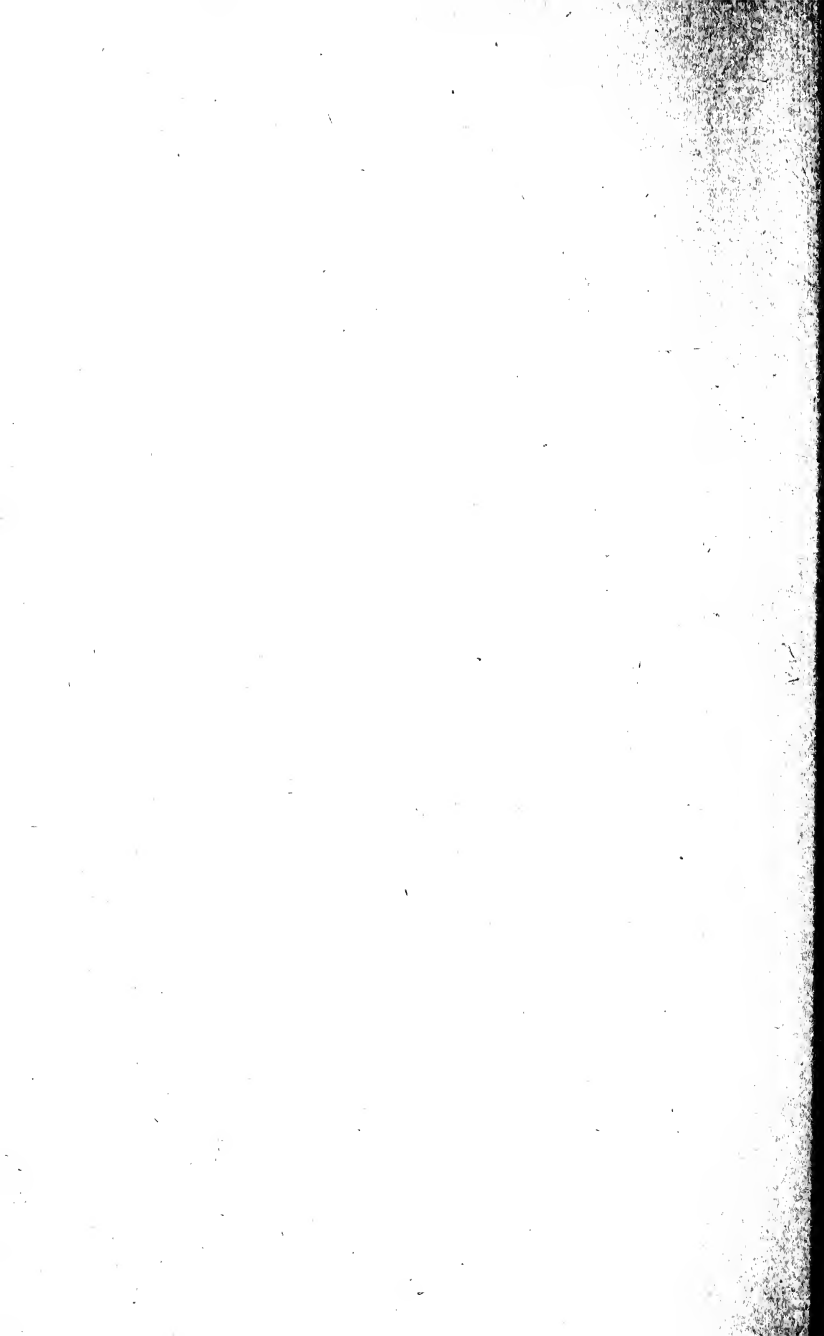
at the century's end. The elder lady knew absolutely nothing. Clara carefully closed her lips, determined that not a word respecting the family secret should ooze from them. There was some chance that Sir Ronald Stanley and Mr. Jabez Fitter and other men of wealth would be guests at the Castle; also a great journalist, a man of light and leading articles, was expected; Clara would never run the risk of anyone lowering the draperies or unlocking the door which hid a possible skeleton. Neither to her mother, nor to her sister, did she utter one word hinting at the secret. Her father did not speak of it again; he deeply regretted having spoken of it at all. Only great distress of mind had forced him to speak that day in Sussex. He trusted that Clara had

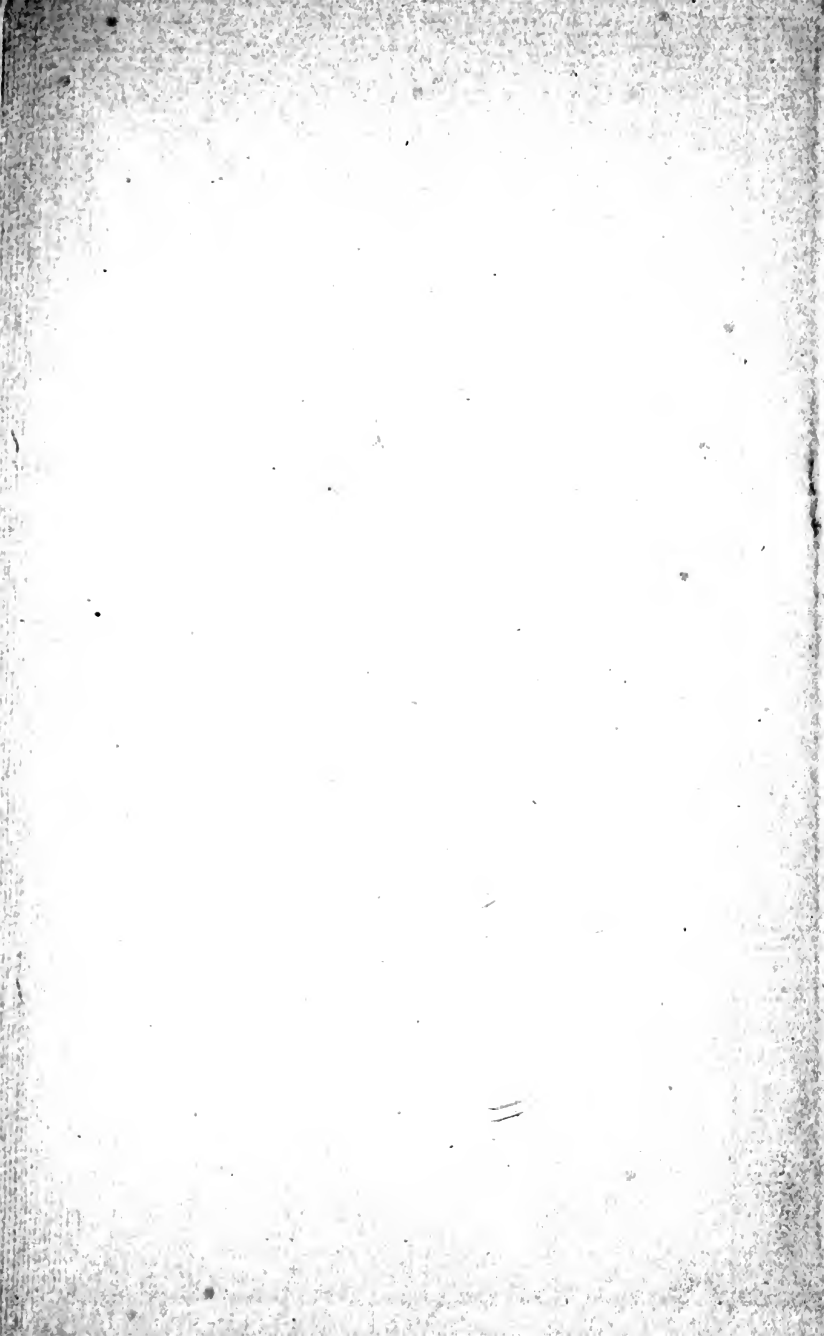
forgotten what he then said. He tried, but in vain, to forget it himself. He was even less happy in Perthshire than he had been in London, for in the Highlands it was not in his power to protest.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.









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